

The Feature Film as Short Story: The “Little Disturbances” of Nicole Holofcener

Rachel Lister, Durham University, United Kingdom

In an early scene in Nicole Holofcener’s film *Friends with Money* (2006), Catherine Keener’s character Christine informs her husband of her plans for their new family room. “I think it should be very minimalist,” she tells him. “A minimalist family room?” responds David with skepticism. “Yeah, you know, just the necessities, beige, gray, a shock of color like an orange lamp in the corner or something.” David ends the discussion by shutting the door between them. In the next scene the camera pans over the cluttered, beige living room of a new character, Marty, a man we soon discover has little regard for aesthetics. The most striking feature of his neutral, functional living room is the orange lamp that stands in the corner. Viewers see the lamp for only a second as the camera scans the room. The reference is easily missed but serves as a highly effective visual cue, debunking Christine’s rather pretentious vision of her prospective family room. This juxtaposition exemplifies the poetics of economy and restraint viewers and critics have come to identify with Nicole Holofcener. A writer and director, Holofcener has made four independent feature films to date: *Walking and Talking* (1996), *Lovely and Amazing* (2001), *Friends with Money* and *Please Give* (2010). Holofcener’s films have been generally well received, with many critics praising her ability to show rather than tell, to convey layers of meaning with skillful economy and capture the complexities of everyday life with subtlety and humor.

When attempting to capture the essence of Holofcener’s filmmaking, some reviewers have turned to the world of literature for analogies, identifying the short story as the literary equivalent of a Holofcener film. Several reviews of *Please Give* make this comparison. Kirk Honeycutt of the *Hollywood Reporter* encourages viewers to approach the film as they would a “finely tuned short story with every glance and gesture full of suggestive meaning” (2010). Writing for the *New York Times*, David Denby observes that “Holofcener structures the film like a finely wrought short story” (2010). David Gritten reflects similarly on Holofcener’s work in the *Daily Telegraph*, finding that all four films are “as satisfying as short stories” (2010). Reviewing *Please Give*, Kevin Bowen makes the same comparison, noting that “small things” in her films come to “have large meanings” (2010).

Initially, the rationale behind this comparison might be unclear. Affinities between literary and cinematic forms and narratives remain the subject of

considerable debate. Much critical theory on this subject focuses on the relationship between cinema and drama, while other theorists, such as André Bazin and Susan Sontag, contend that the “film’s deepest affinities are with the novel, not with the play” (Mast, 1992: 353). James Monaco agrees that the novel is the literary form with the closest connection to feature films, due to its capacity for narrative development. According to Monaco, “The narrative potential of film is so marked that it has developed its strongest bond not with painting, not even with drama, but with the novel. Both films and novels tell long stories with a wealth of detail” (2000: 44). However, other theorists turn to the short story as a model in their comparative studies of literary and cinematic narrative. Seymour Chatman addresses the differences between novel and film, yet his description of filmic narrative resonates clearly with much of the theoretical discourse surrounding short stories (1992: 408). According to Chatman, in film narratives “The dominant mode is presentational, not assertive” (Ibid.). He further explains that “A film doesn’t say, ‘This *is* the state of affairs,’ it merely shows you that state of affairs [...] [I]n its essential visual mode, film does not describe at all but merely presents; or better, it *depicts*, in the original etymological sense of that word: renders in pictorial form” (Ibid., emphasis in original). Chatman counters the notion that this theory suggests a purist attitude towards film, or a “die-hard adherence to silent films.” Rather, film as a whole “attracts that component of our perceptual apparatus which we tend to favor over the other senses. Seeing is, after all, believing” (Ibid). The short story became identified in the twentieth century as a powerful site for mimetic representation. Anton Chekhov famously declared that “It is better to say not enough, than to say too much” (1965: 28). In her critical study of the short story, Valerie Shaw asserts that the short story writer “must show more than he tells, hint rather than explain, offer scenes where the novelist might provide description and narrative explanation” (1983: 47). Chatman draws on the term “*camera eye style*” used in literary criticism in reference to “non-narrated,” Hemingway-esque fiction, citing the short story “The Killers” (1927) as an example of this presentational mode. In Chatman’s view, “no one records the events of, for example, ‘The Killers’: they are just *revealed*, as if some instrument—some cross between a video tape recorder and speech synthesizer—had recorded visually and then translated those visuals into the most neutral kind of language” (1992: 408, emphasis in original).

Further links to short story theory arise in relation to Chatman’s emphasis on sight as a means of understanding. As Dominic Head notes, “visual metaphors” are prevalent in short story theory (1992: 10). Writer V. S. Pritchett describes the form as “a way of seeing through a situation,” a means of offering a “glimpse through the life” of a character (1986). For Elizabeth Bowen, the short story has “an advantage over” the novel, “because it must be more concentrated, can be more visionary, and is not weighed down (as the novel is bound to be) by facts, explanation, or

analysis" (1999: 128). Noting Head's observation, Timothy Clark further explores this association between vision and the short story, arguing that "With its brevity, the imminence of the end, the ability to be read at one sitting, and so on, the short story famously offers itself as something to be 'seen' as a whole or not at all" (2004: 10). Chatman notes a similar effect in his description of the viewer's experience of film, claiming that "Once that illusory story-time is established in film, even dead moments, moments when nothing moves, will be felt to be part of the temporal whole, just as the taxi meter continues to run as we sit fidgeting in a traffic jam" (1992: 410).

This article explores these links between films and short stories in relation to Holofcener's feature films, arguing that the short story is the most useful narrative model for her viewers. Drawing on a range of theories about the principles and effects of film and short story writing, including the idea of apprehending a narrative "as a whole," I show how comparisons with the short story offer new ways of reading films that eschew more traditional narrative structures in their attempts to capture the alienation and conflict inherent in postmodern, urban experience. This reading also illuminates connections between Holofcener's films and the fictional worlds of several postmodern short story writers. My analysis reveals how Holofcener adopts the short story's formal narrative strategies to explore themes of denial, alienation, and the challenges of communication in postmodern America. Indeed, twentieth century writers and literary critics repeatedly associated these themes with the short story form.

Grand Themes for Slight Forms: Conflict, Oblivion and Alienation

Theories of the short story's function and potential have shifted over the centuries and the defining characteristics of its form remain open to debate. My analysis of Holofcener's films draws comparisons with a particular kind of short story, the origins of which are usually traced to Anton Chekhov's experiments with form. In his much-admired late nineteenth century short stories, Chekhov anticipated strategies and techniques that would shape the "lyric short story," a term literary critic Eileen Baldeshwiler coined in 1969 (see Baldeshwiler, 1994: 231). Following Chekhov's example, many twentieth-century short story writers abandoned plot-driven narratives and began to use the form to capture the fluctuations of individuals' "internal states" and dramatize shifting perceptions of "reality" (Ibid.). Such themes are similarly at the heart of Holofcener's films. During one of their rather fractious conversations in *Lovely and Amazing*, Annie asks her older sister Michelle "What's reality?" This question resonates throughout Holofcener's oeuvre. Holofcener's producer Anthony Bregman states that their aim is to make films that "feel very real to people" (Holofcener, 2010e). Reviews suggest they have succeeded. Holofcener has been repeatedly singled out for her powerful cinematic representations of "real" characters' everyday lives.

Realism of course takes many forms. As Christopher Williams notes in his essay on realism in film, "Realisms do, necessarily, tangle with conventional ways of seeing truths and emotions and cultural lives" (2000: 211). For Holofcener, realism involves capturing the complexities and contradictions of situations and characters and not compromising them in the name of formulaic plot lines. Holofcener therefore makes films whose themes defy easy summation or classification. Discussing *Please Give*, the filmmaker observes that she would not be able to "sum it up in a sentence ... which is a good thing" (Holofcener, 2010e). One might say the same of the lyric short story. It is perhaps more challenging to summarize this kind of text than a long novel with a causal, end-determined plot. To develop her own approach to plot, Holofcener needed to "get smart" and "forget what she learned in film school," where "they make you do the cards and the outline and every character has to have a very specific want in every scene" (Holofcener, 2010d). In contrast, many of the characters in Holofcener's films are unable to recognize or articulate what they want. Some scenes in her films do not seem to advance the plot. For example, a brief but moving scene in *Please Give* involves married couple Kate and Alex and their teenage daughter, Abby. Kate spots her daughter shopping in the supermarket and alerts her husband. Together they stand and watch Abby as she browses the shelves. Interviewing Holofcener, Scott Tobias notes that this scene does not "move the story forward" (Holofcener, 2010b). Holofcener agrees that she might have used this scene to introduce another plot line. Kate and Alex might have caught their daughter shoplifting, but Holofcener rejected this idea (Ibid.). However, the scene is important, since both parents' facial expressions suggest "awe" at their daughter's burgeoning independence (Ibid.). There is no "specific want" in the scene, but it demonstrates Kate's love for a daughter she is at odds with for most of the film.

When considering why he has never written a novel, short story writer Raymond Carver observes that he prefers the shorter form because it is the most appropriate site for exploring the unaccountable:

To write a novel a writer should be living in a world that makes sense, a world that the writer can believe in, draw a bead on, and then write about accurately. A world that will, for a time anyway, stay fixed in one place. Along with this there has to be a belief in the essential correctness of that world. [This] wasn't the case with the world I knew and was living in. My world was one that seemed to change gears, along with its rules, every day. (1983: 26)

Unlike the blue-collar workers that dominate Carver's fictional world, many of Holofcener's characters have everything they want in material terms yet continue searching for meaning, having lost faith in their vision of "the essential correctness of the world" (Ibid.). Like Carver, Holofcener

uses short narrative lines and rejects conventional narratives of progression to capture feelings of estrangement and dislocation.

Many short story writers use the form to work against conventions of realism that have become associated with the novel, disregarding established notions of narrative progression in favor of a more synchronic approach. Readers of modern short stories are thus more likely to find meaning by tracing patterns of association rather than a single, causal narrative line. Holofcener's films encourage this kind of approach. As Holofcener states, she has "trouble creating plots." When she first thought of the storyline for *Please Give*, Holofcener was delighted because she felt she had found what she described as: "my version of a plot, like, conflict" (Holofcener, 2010c). For Carver, the short story remains the most appropriate vehicle for the representation of conflict due to its elliptical nature, because "the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the surface (but sometimes broken and unsettled)" help "create tension" (2000: 92). Many short story writers have followed Chekhov's advice, exploiting the form's constraints to galvanize the reader's agency and point to latent emotions and thoughts through use of ellipses and silences. Discussing her role as editor of her own work, Holofcener describes her approach as "brutal [...]. I cut out a lot" (Holofcener, 2010a: 131). Rather than offering explanations or guidance through "descriptive detail," Holofcener uses a range of indirect methods to guide the viewer toward subtext (Holofcener, 2011: vi).

Holofcener is particularly interested in encouraging the viewer's active participation and has spoken repeatedly of her aim to involve the viewer fully in the "story," a term she uses frequently in reference to her films. This concern has informed her approach to aesthetics. As Scott Tobias points out, her films are "extremely unvarnished" (Holofcener, 2010b). The costumes, set design and musical scores of all four films remain muted throughout, unless loud or garish tones are required to signal a particular character's sensibility. In *Please Give*, nonagenarian Andra's "post-menopausal red" hair points to her denial that she is getting older (she repeatedly insists that she is going to "get better"). Holofcener states that "she does not care if [the actors] are wearing make-up as long as it looks like they're not wearing make-up" and is chiefly concerned with how the viewer's awareness of aesthetics will affect their response to the film (Ibid.). Thus, Holofcener does not want characters' appearance to "pull" viewers "out of the movie" but rather "want[s] people to be engaged in the story and the characters and not think about a style" (Ibid.). In her commentary on *Friends with Money*, Holofcener repeatedly praises Craig Richey's score, noting that "music can really enhance a scene" but that she prefers "subtle enhancement" (Bregman, 2006).

This tempered approach helps the viewer uncover tensions inherent in the lives of the immobilized, alienated characters inhabiting Holofcener's worlds. These tensions rise to the surface as characters become engaged

in a struggle to understand where their relationships have gone awry and recover their sense of identity and meaning. *Please Give* is freighted with tensions. As noted, Holofcener was pleased to identify a central conflict in the early stages of writing the screenplay. The most explicit conflict concerns two sets of characters—married couple Kate and Alex, who buy furniture from the relatives of the deceased and sell it in their store in Greenwich Village, and their neighbor Andra, the elderly resident of the apartment next door. Kate and Alex have recently bought Andra's apartment, which they eventually hope to renovate and use for themselves. In the meantime, they allow Andra to live there. Andra receives care from her two granddaughters, the vain and insensitive Mary and the sympathetic Rebecca, who senses that the neighbors are waiting for her grandmother to die. However, this central tension between the two families makes visible the various layers of inner conflict that emerge as the families become further acquainted: Kate's sense of conflict over her choice of profession; the plight of homeless people on her street and the demands of her teenage daughter Abby; and Alex, Mary and Abby's burgeoning self-doubt in the wake of broken relationships and unexpected revelations about trusted family members.

Joe Morgenstern opens his review of *Please Give* by noting that the film "comes up short" in terms of its spatial and temporal scope but that "size can be deceiving" (2010: 133). Morgenstern goes on to list the weighty themes Holofcener explores in this "small" film, such as "life, death, love, sex and guilt" (Ibid.). Estrangement from one's environment and one's sense of self is another popular theme among short story writers. In his study of the form, *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor posits that the short story is the literary home of the outsider, arguing that "there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness" (1962: 19). Clark identifies "one of the classic features of the short story" as its potential as a site for "the quirky, the 'submerged,' the dislocated, the overlooked or merely the eccentric" (2004: 6). Though Holofcener focuses on apparently close-knit groups of people, bonded through family ties or friendships, most of her characters find themselves on the margins of these groups, wistfully looking in on the lives of others. Catherine Keener has taken major roles in all four of Holofcener's feature films, and all her characters experience moments of despair as they realize they are "overlooked" and that the issues most affecting them have no bearing on the lives of those around them. These characters stand alone with their diminishing sense of "essential correctness." In *Please Give*, Keener's Kate is clearly unsettled when her husband Alex admits he does not feel guilty for making a profit from furniture that belongs to "the children of dead people." In *Friends with Money*, Christine cannot understand how David can have no scruples about their construction work's impact on their neighbors' lives.

Most of Holofcener's characters struggle to deal with or articulate these feelings of alienation, leaving the viewer to read "the landscape just under the surface" and decode their behavior. In the case of Jane from *Friends with Money*, disillusionment manifests itself in her refusal to wash her hair and her tendency to shout angrily at passersby, berating them for their careless behavior. She seems unaware of how her actions affect those around her. In his analysis of Christine and David, the film's most damaged couple, Anthony Bregman notes that the "defining" element of their marriage is "being oblivious" (2006). Oblivion, apathy and denial are dominant themes in both Holofcener's films and the modern short story. For writer Nadine Gordimer, the short story "suits modern consciousness" precisely because it is "best expressed as flashes of insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference" (1994: 178). Writers such as Hemingway, Carver and John Cheever have taken Chekhov's cue and exploited the indeterminacy inherent in the short story's brief, elliptical form to capture the inner workings of characters in denial of their own behavior. Holofcener uses short narrative lines to similar effect. Fragmented conversations, often hampered by unanswered questions, expose a lack of understanding between characters trapped in an apathetic daze, lacking self-awareness.

The immobilizing denial that defines characters in Holofcener's films extends to those that pride themselves on their honesty. Holofcener's small groups of characters often include somebody whose inappropriate observations puncture the signature quietness of her films. For example, rather than supporting people in her life, Michelle from *Lovely and Amazing* offers only facile solutions to their problems, advising them to tell other people to "fuck off." In *Friends with Money*, Jane raises the issue of Olivia's financial problems at the dinner table, much to her friends' discomfort. Two characters perform this function in *Please Give*. Andra's observations veer between the highly comic and the unnecessarily cruel. Likewise, her granddaughter Mary's self-doubt following a break-up finds expression in highly insensitive statements and inappropriate questions. For example, whilst sitting next to her grandmother, Mary asks Kate and Alex what they plan to do with Andra's apartment after she dies. Lurking beneath these outbursts and insults are unspoken stories of fear, bewilderment and dislocation. [1]

Telling the Truth: Silence and Repetition

Writers working within the confines of the short story form often use repetition of images or words to highlight subtext. One is reminded of Chekhov's "Misery" (1886) or Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain" (1925), where characters find solace in the repetition of apparently trivial actions or give expression to buried feelings through the reiteration of safe, familiar phrases. Through such repetition of motifs and lines of dialogue, Holofcener signals hidden emotions and unresolved conflicts, setting up synchronic patterns of meaning. It is unsurprising that repetition is a key

dimension of Holofcener's filmic world, inhabited as it is by characters that express latent frustration and doubt through obsessive rituals. In *Friends with Money*, Olivia arranges face-cream samples she cannot afford in regimental fashion. In *Lovely and Amazing*, Elizabeth is obsessed with rescuing neglected dogs. In *Please Give*, Mary is a habitual drinker, tanner and stalker. Working with short narrative lines that dramatize a period of change within a few brief scenes, Holofcener uses repetition to emphasize ostensibly minor points that give the viewer openings onto deeper issues. Her handling of the breakdown of Christine and David's marriage in *Friends with Money* reveals the centrality of this strategy. Holofcener establishes a pattern early in the film to signal Christine and David's estrangement. In their first scene, Christine bumps her leg on a coffee table. Though Christine exclaims at the pain and rubs her leg, David seems oblivious to what has happened and makes no comment. In a later scene, this pattern is repeated when she treads on their son's toy, with both characters responding the same way. Toward the end of the film, Christine scalds herself with boiling water, which triggers a confrontation with David. This time, Christine provides the desired response, asking herself if she is alright and demanding to know why David never checks that she is not hurt. Commenting on responses to the film, Holofcener has revealed that most viewers do not pick up on this pattern on first viewing and are therefore shocked by Christine's anger at this point (Bregman, 2006). Viewers only appreciate the reason for the argument upon a second viewing, as David's silences start to resonate (Ibid.).

Both Carrie Battan (2010) and Mallory Rice (2010) draw brief but illuminating comparisons between the work of Holofcener and Lorrie Moore, a short story writer and novelist celebrated for her representations of the "lonely voices" of postmodern American women. The comparison is apt on several levels. As these writers note, Moore and Holofcener share an ability to capture the complexities and absurdities of everyday relationships within a fleeting moment, often fusing the pathetic and comedic. Commenting on *Friends with Money*, Holofcener describes the scene in which Olivia dresses up as a French maid for her boyfriend as "funny," "degrading" and "sad," a combination of effects Moore achieves in stories exploring the steps women take to please men. One is reminded of her story "How to be an Other Woman" from the collection *Self Help*, in which a female voice advises the reader to assume a range of personae to keep lovers amused. Although Moore has written two novels, she associates short narrative forms with a capacity for truth-telling, arguing that the short story "lies less" than the novel (quoted in Moore, 2005). Both writers use short narrative lines to explore the buried tensions that thwart communication on a daily basis. The silences and non sequiturs in their characters' tentative, fraught conversations point to issues nobody wants to confront. Like Holofcener, Moore is concerned with capturing individual perceptions of reality, often juxtaposing them

and exposing their disparity for tragi-comic effect. There are further similarities in their choice of subject matter. In the film *Walking and Talking* and the short story "Four Calling Birds, Three French Hens," Holofcener and Moore respectively find humor and pathos in the sense of purposelessness that can follow the loss of a pet. In both cases, a woman struggles to come to terms with the death of a cat and becomes increasingly isolated as others accept the loss and move forward.

While comparison with Moore is certainly helpful, one also thinks of Moore's literary antecedents when watching Holofcener's films. Celebrated short story writer Grace Paley uses the form to dramatize the challenges of embattled romances and friendships. Moore identifies her main theme as "the little disturbances that rattle the windows," invoking Paley's fictional world in *The Little Disturbances of Man*, Paley's first short story collection (Ibid.). Such "little disturbances" fascinate Holofcener—ostensibly casual but cutting remarks that imply deep resentment and gestures and silences that betray a lack of understanding or care and prompt awkward questions about a relationship's purpose. Paley's stories contain women who are either searching for meaning or trying to resist those definitions of meaning that conventional wisdom identifies as fulfilling. "When will you be a person?," asks the mother of Paley's recurring heroine, Faith Darwin, frustrated that her daughter's life is yet to assume a "known form" (1985: 33). One is reminded of the friends that repeatedly ask Olivia what she plans to do with her life, offering her "known forms" as models for her future and ways of "figuring out what you really want to do with your life." In both Holofcener's films and Paley's stories, "known forms" do not guarantee happiness. The married characters that try to fix Olivia's life are as unsettled as she is. Even Frannie and Matt, identified by other characters as the happiest couple, are vulnerable. In one of their late scenes, Frannie shares her theory about Christine's need to question their friend Aaron's sexuality. Matt responds, "I have no idea what you just said" and does not invite her to repeat her observations.

One of the most striking affinities between Holofcener and short story writers such as Carver, Paley and Moore is their fascination with the "limitations and possibilities of language" (Lister, 2006). Moore is painfully aware of what language cannot achieve, often pointing to its absurdity through the use of puns. Although dialogue is crucial to Holofcener's "unvarnished" films, she too makes us aware of language's limitations. Puns generate humor in some of the most delicate situations in Holofcener's films. In *Walking and Talking*, Laura accompanies Amelia to the vet to hear their ailing cat's prognosis. As Amelia holds "Big Jeans" in her arms, the vet tells them the cat has cancer and that treatment will be very expensive. When Laura gently suggests they put Big Jeans down, Amelia misunderstands her and lowers the cat onto the table. This is one of several moments of misinterpretation between these friends. Both

Paley and Moore use the short story, a form that eschews pat answers, to expose the limitations of talk. Most of their stories are set in the city and several of their heroines regularly attend therapy sessions that only aggravate their grievances. Holofcener addresses the same issue in *Walking and Talking*. Laura is training to be a therapist but often finds herself drifting away from her patients' concerns (for instance, she fails to recognize when a patient is feigning neurosis to avoid paying for therapy). Amelia attends therapy but is rejected by her self-involved therapist when she needs him most. Her casual but telling remark to ex-boyfriend Andrew, whose father is suffering from Alzheimer's, could have come from a Paley or Moore short story: "You go to your coping with Alzheimer's meetings more than you see your Dad."

Walking and Talking establishes Holofcener's fascination with another prevalent theme in short narratives, namely failed communication. The telephone is the film's most powerful metaphor for the challenges of communicating in New York. In his study of independent film, Emanuel Levy writes about the importance of the answering machine in *Walking and Talking* (1999: 279), an issue Holofcener notes herself. For most of the film, Amelia has to resort to the answering machine to reach her friend Laura, who is engaged to be married and has stopped calling Amelia "ten times a day." Amelia's new relationship with Bill breaks down when he hears a message from Laura on her answering machine. Amelia's friend has never met him, but refers to him as "the ugly guy." When Amelia's cat dies after falling through a window, it is the neighbors that offer support, agreeing that the loss can be devastating because pets "listen."

In the short story "Listening," Paley dramatizes a series of conversations that expose the challenges of getting somebody to listen, figuring silence as the "space that follows unkindness in which little truths grow" (1987: 203). Silence is similarly an index of truth in Holofcener's filmic worlds. When Oliver Platt's Alex in *Please Give* identifies a stranger as the grandfather of a young girl, Kate tells him that the man is probably her father and implies that he is roughly the same age as Alex. When Alex scoffs at this, replying, "Yeah but I don't look like that," neither his daughter nor his wife offer reassurance. He then asks, "Do I look like that?," only to be met with more silence. Holofcener is particularly interested in subjects that are more likely to invite silence or covert speculation than honest dialogue and that rarely find their way into people's everyday conversations. *Friends with Money* is particularly rich in taboo subjects—the challenges of perimenopause, uncertainty over a husband's sexuality and the titular theme of money between friends. Silence is more prevalent in Holofcener's most recent films. As her work has developed, Holofcener seems to offer fewer explanations to the viewer. While face-to-face talking ultimately brings reconciliation to the characters in *Walking and Talking*, the dialogue in *Friends with Money* is more economical and the characters more evasive. When characters try

to confront each other directly, the conversation changes direction. As Olivia confides in Frannie that her boyfriend does not look at her during sex, Frannie responds tentatively: "Hate sex?" "No ... anyway," replies Olivia, before moving on to another topic. In the same conversation, Olivia asks Frannie to lend her money to learn how to become a personal trainer. When Frannie hesitates, Olivia reminds her that she does not have to work. "I feel like taking care of my kids is work," Frannie responds. "But you have full-time help," counters Olivia. When Frannie replies "That's true, are you trying to make me feel bad?," Olivia apologizes and Frannie shifts the focus to Christine and David's troubled marriage. Several truths "growl" in a fragmented, static conversation that, on the surface, appears of little substance.

Finding an Ending: A "Tangible Change"?

Eileen Baldeshwiler argues that the "plot line" of the lyric short story "consists of [...] tracing complex emotions to a closing cadence utterly unlike the reasoned solution of the conventional, cause-and-effect narrative" (1994: 206). As Holofcener notes, viewers have expressed confusion over the endings of her films and objected to their apparent abruptness (Bregman, 2006). The reasons for such responses are clear after initially viewing her films, which seem to end in the middle of seemingly mundane conversations, making viewers feel they have been deprived of an ending. Reluctant readers of short stories often make similar objections, asserting their preference for the linear, plot-driven novel with its rewarding movement toward closure. According to short story writer Joyce Carol Oates, "no matter its mysteries or experimental properties, [the short story] achieves closure—meaning that, when it ends, the attentive reader understands why" (1992: 7). Aware that her endings have frustrated viewers, Holofcener argues that they offer the kind of resolution Oates describes. Like the most powerful endings of short stories, her final lines or images might seem arbitrary at first, but a viewer attuned to her films' nuances will understand why they end where they do and feel inspired to reflect on the film as a whole. The effect Chatman and Clark describe in relation to films and short stories respectively—the sense that every exchange or image is part of a greater whole—emerges clearly in Holofcener's closing scenes. Like many short stories, her films end with flashes of insight that point to the possibility of coming to terms with buried issues and tensions.

Baldshwiler's image of the "tracing" of "complex emotions to a closing cadence" proves helpful here. In *Friends with Money*, Holofcener leaves us with Olivia's deceptively simple admission that she has "problems," a response to her new boyfriend's acknowledgement that he has difficulty interacting with people. Olivia has spent much of the film trying to deflect her friends' concerns. However, her secret behavior, witnessed only by the viewer, suggests they are right to be worried, if perhaps not for the reasons they give. In one of Holofcener's telling repetitive sequences, we

see Olivia obsessively lining up cosmetic samples of products she cannot afford. We also witness her making telephone calls to the married man with whom she had an affair and spying on him outside his house. None of her friends know of these habits and Olivia's problems do not necessarily stem from issues identified by other women in the group. However, her final line, also the closing line of the film, certainly points to the possibility of change. Olivia's pattern of denial and sublimation is coming to a close. According to Oates, the ending of a modern short story "need not be a formally articulated statement" but should "signal a tangible change of some sort; a distinct shift in consciousness; a deepening of insight" (1992: 7). Viewers might feel frustrated by the ending of *Friends with Money* because they sense they have witnessed the beginning of a fruitful dialogue, but the most important effect of Olivia's closing words—"I got problems"—is a sense of promise and mobilization.

In *American Independent Cinema*, Geoff King finds little evidence of resolution in *Lovely and Amazing*. He argues that the only gesture toward "closure" takes the form of the mother's release from hospital. Jane has been hospitalized for most of the film due to complications following a liposuction operation. On the surface, then, a storyline comes to a close. However, King writes that "Few of the myriad personal and emotional problems faced by the major characters appear in any way resolved" (2009: 227). However, this is not an entirely accurate evaluation of the film's ending. The women do not end up meeting promising men or gaining a foothold in their preferred professions, yet their relationships with each other are strengthened and they arrive at several important realizations. For instance, Emily Mortimer's character, Elizabeth, rejects the renewed overtures of Kevin the movie star, a man from whom she has requested validation of her beauty. Similarly, Michelle finally admits she has "a problem with anger." While much remains uncertain for Michelle, she has a very touching scene with her younger adopted sister, Annie. Throughout *Lovely and Amazing*, Michelle has been visibly irritated by Annie, complaining when her mother asks her to care for her sister as she recovers from surgery. In a late scene, Michelle spots Annie in a burger bar and sits with her. For the first time, Michelle offers another character unqualified support, telling the insecure Annie that she likes her hair. Moreover, she enables Annie to view her birth parents in a positive way. When earlier asked about her birth mother, Annie frankly revealed she was a "crack addict." In this scene, Michelle tells her she may have inherited positive values and talents from her parents. When Annie gives her usual response about her mother, Michelle answers "True, but I'm sure she was a lot of other things too. Some of them must be good." "Maybe she was a good swimmer," reflects Annie. It is a moment of hope, as one character offers another a different way of seeing. Again, one senses that we are witnessing an opening onto a promising relationship. In *Please Give*, a single gesture provides hope for Mary, who

has spent much of the film expressing anger at being rejected by her boyfriend through destructive statements and actions. Mary has an affair with Kate's husband. Alex, stalks and insults her rival and offends her sister and grandmother. In her final scene, however, Mary sits with Rebecca on the sofa watching television and rests her head on her sister's shoulder, revealing her vulnerability for the first time. Viewers watching this scene might find themselves in the potentially unsettling position of sympathizing with a character who has given them little reason to do so—a "little disturbance" for Holofcener's viewers seeking the comfort of easy identifications. Holofcener states that she wants her films to be "emotionally-felt experience[s]" and that she does not expect viewers to emerge from theaters identifying with only one viewpoint (Holofcener, 2010e).

Holofcener's endings thus offer promise in the form of unexpected or unlikely connections. Indeed, much of her films' poignancy derives from hints at latent connections between characters that, until the closing scenes, are often apparent only to the viewer. In *Friends with Money*, it is Christine's housekeeper who finally responds to her with the sympathy she needs. In the film's penultimate scene, which was originally the final scene, Christine bangs her leg. The concerned housekeeper, off camera, asks if she is alright, making the gesture Christine has been waiting for from her husband. In *Please Give*, one of the most powerful late scenes brings together two women from different sides of the film's central conflict. Though Rebecca suspected that Kate wanted her grandmother to die, it is Kate who provides the necessary sympathy when Andra passes away. Rebecca finds solace in Kate's assurances that she is a "good person," and Rebecca is finally able to lean on someone else. In the same scene, Rebecca brings comfort to Kate, who has also broken down after another guilt-inducing attempt to help people beyond her immediate circle. The women, whilst not divulging too much about the causes of their own distress, assure each other they are doing the best they can. Their connection is confirmed at Andra's funeral, when the two families say goodbye and Rebecca and Kate make reassuring eye contact.

Familial bonds are also restored, as seemingly authentic connections between the two families prove false. When Kate's daughter Abby first meets the beautiful Mary, she immediately feels a connection, admiring her frankness. At the dinner table, Mary and Abby list things that most frustrate them in everyday life, such as being told that something will not hurt when it will, or people neglecting to thank them for holding open a door. Toward the end of the film, Abby visits Mary's spa for a facial treatment. Attending to Abby's face, Mary tells her to wiggle her toes as a distraction from the pain. Abby replies, "That's like one of those things we hate." Mary seems nonplussed and when Abby reminds her of their conversation, she remarks "I don't follow." While the connection with Mary proves false, there is hope for Abby's embattled relationship with

her mother, Kate. In the final scene, Kate offers to buy expensive jeans for her daughter, having previously admonished Abby for expecting her to spend so much money “when there are forty-five homeless people living on our street.” As Kate and Alex watch their daughter in her new jeans, a feeling of reconciliation settles over the scene. One senses Kate has recognized there is meaning to be found in attending and listening to her daughter. As often occurs in Holofcener’s films, acts of looking form the most telling moments. The significance of both scenes—Rebecca’s connection with Kate and Kate’s connection with her daughter—depends on the viewer’s attention to their gestures more than their words. It is the eye contact between Rebecca and Kate and the glance Kate directs towards her daughter that convey the mood of reconciliation and the promise missing for much of the film. In both cases, we sense we have been given a “glimpse through” characters’ lives, as Holofcener, to use Chatman’s terms, “depicts” a kind of breakthrough in “pictorial form,” rather than “weigh[ing] down” her film with “facts, explanation, or analysis.” These closing scenes rely also on the viewer’s ability to place the scene in the context of the whole film, to see them as part of the wider narrative. Clearly, there has been a “tangible change” for these characters. Interviewing Holofcener, Peter Hammond identifies the purchasing of jeans for her daughter as a “moment of transition” for Kate and Holofcener agrees that this signifies “growth” (Holofcener, 2010a: 130).

This article has illuminated how the application of the poetics of the short story, a relatively neglected form in comparative studies of literature and film, might enrich interpretations of particular kinds of filmic narrative that aim to capture the fragmented nature of postmodern, everyday life. In Holofcener’s case, her dominant theme of estrangement requires the poetics of economy and restraint associated with the literary form. As an independent filmmaker, Holofcener occupies a similar position to writers that, favoring the short story over the novel, are regarded as outsiders by the publishing world. She has often spoken of the challenges of finding support for her films, just as those who prefer to write stories over novels have spoken of having to convince publishers of their work’s value. This frustration finds a kind of release in her films, all of which, Holofcener acknowledges, have autobiographical dimensions. In *Lovely and Amazing*, Michelle offers a kind of meta-commentary on Holofcener’s struggle, spending much of her time trying to persuade people of the merits of her art.

The appeal of Holofcener’s films is perhaps most effectively captured by one of her actors, Oliver Platt, as he recounts his first reaction to the script for *Please Give*:

I just loved reading it. I didn’t necessarily understand it, which is why I wanted to do it. If I was walking out of this movie I would hope I’d feel the same way. I loved it and I would then go and talk

to somebody about it for three hours about why and try to figure it out. (Holofcener, 2010e)

As elliptical, open forms, short stories often inspire the kind of reaction Platt suggests typically reward second and third readings. Holofcener's films invite us as viewers to assume the role of "co-creator" and, like the reader of the short story, our own "satisfaction ultimately rests in this" (Rohrberger, 1966: 106-107).

Notes

[1] In her reading of Guy de Maupassant's short stories, Armine Kotim Mortimer writes that the meaning of many short stories lies in their "undercurrents" (1989: 276). As Mortimer puts it, "the reader is actively solicited to recognize that undercurrent, encoded in diverse ways, and in so doing to create a second story that is not told outright" (Ibid.). I would not go so far as to identify the presence of "second stories" in Holofcener's films, as facets of storylines are left to the reader's imagination rather than whole narrative lines. Nevertheless, Mortimer's terminology is useful here.

Bibliography

Baldeshwiler, Eileen (1994) *The Lyric Short Story*, in Charles E. May (ed.), *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens: Ohio University Press, pp. 231-244.

Battan, Carrie (2010) Please Give: Lorrie Moore-isms, *Thought Catalog* [online], 27 May. Available at: <http://thoughtcatalog.com/2010/please-give-nicole-holofcener%E2%80%99s-lorrie-moore-isms> [Accessed 20 August 2011]

Bowen, Elizabeth (1999) *Stories by Elizabeth Bowen*, in Hermione Lee (ed.), *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*. London: Vintage.

Bowen, Kevin (2010) Film Review: 'Please Give': A Film that Finds Big Meaning in Small Issues, *Buzzine* [online], 3 June. Available at <http://www.buzzinefilm.com/reviews/film-review-please-give-06042010> [Accessed 1 August 2011]

Carver, Raymond (1983) *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*. Santa Barbara: Capra.

Carver, Raymond (2000) On Writing, in William L. Stull (ed.), *Call if You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Prose*. London: Harvill.

Chatman, Seymour (1992) What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa), in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th edition. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 403-419.

Chekhov, Anton (1965) To L. L. Shtcheglov 22 January 1888, in Louis S. Friedland (ed.), *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics*. London: Dover Publications.

Clark, Timothy (2004) Not Seeing the Short Story: A Blind Phenomenology of Reading, *The Oxford Literary Review: The Blind Short Story*, pp. 5-30.

Denby, David (2010) Guilt Trips, *The New Yorker* [online], 3 May. Available at: http://newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2010/05/03/100503cricinema_denby [Accessed 1 August 2011]

Gordimer, Nadine (1994) The Flash of Fireflies, in Charles E. May (ed.), *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Gritten, David (2010) Why I Love: Nicole Holofcener, *The Daily Telegraph* [online], 10 June. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/7819156/Whi-I-Love-Nicole-Holofcener.html> [Accessed 1 August 2011]

Head, Dominic (1992) *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holofcener, Nicole (2010a) Q & A, Interview with Peter Hammond, *KCET* television, 20 April 2010, in Nicole Holofcener (2011) *Please Give: The Shooting Script*. New York: Newmarket Press, pp. 123-132.

Holofcener, Nicole (2010b) Nicole Holofcener, Interview with Scott Tobias, *The A.V. Club* [online], 29 April. Available at: <http://www.avclub.com/articles/nicole-holofcener,40605/> [Accessed 22 August, 2011]

Holofcener, Nicole (2010c) Nicole Holofcener Talks Please Give#1 [online], 2010. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijoa09Jc-9Q> [Accessed 22 August 2011].

Holofcener, Nicole (2010d) Q and A with Nicole Holofcener, *Film Independent's Preview Screening Series*, in *Please Give* [DVD]. Sony Pictures Classics.

Holofcener, Nicole et al. (2010e) Behind the Scenes of *Please Give*, in *Please Give* [DVD]. Sony Pictures Classics.

Holofcener, Nicole (2011) Introduction, in Nicole Holofcener, *Please Give: The Shooting Script*. New York: Newmarket Press, pp. v-vii.

- Holofcener, Nicole (2011) *Please Give: The Shooting Script*. New York: Newmarket Press.
- Honeycutt, Kirk (2010) Please Give – Film Review, *Hollywood Reporter* [online], 14 October. Available at: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/please-give-film-review-291214> [Accessed 1 August 2011]
- King, Geoff (2009) *American Independent Cinema*. New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Levy, Emanuel (1999) *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of the American Independent Film*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lister, Rachel (2006) Lorrie Moore, *The Literary Encyclopedia* [online], 9 February. Available at: <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=11691> [Accessed 1 August 2011].
- Mast, Gerald, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (eds.) (1992) *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Monaco, James (2000) *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media and Multimedia: Language, History, Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Lorrie (2005) Lorrie Moore, *The Believer* [online], October. Available at: http://www.believermag.com/issues/200510/?read=interview_moore [Accessed 22 August, 2011]
- Morgenstern, Joe (2010) Perilously Close to Perfection, *The Wall Street Journal* 30 April, in Nicole Holofcener (2011) *Please Give: The Shooting Script*. New York: Newmarket Press.
- Mortimer, Armine Kotin (1989) Second Stories, in Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (eds.), *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, pp. 276-298.
- Oates, Joyce Carol (1992) *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, Frank (1962) *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. Cleveland: World Publishing Company.
- Paley, Grace (1985) *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*. London: Virago.
- Paley, Grace (1987) *Later the Same Day*. Middlesex: Penguin.

Lister

Pritchett, V. S. (1986) Interview with Ben Forkner and Philippe Séjourné [online], 30 July 2008. Available at: <http://www.jsse.revue.org/index319.html> [Accessed 22 March 2012]

Rice, Mallory (2010) Lorrie Moore is the Nicole Holofcener of Film, *Malloryrice* [online], 6 April. Available at <http://malloryrice.tumblr.com/post/500906207/nicole-holofcener-is-the-lorrie-moore-of-film-and> [Accessed 20 August 2011]

Rohrberger, Mary (1966) *Hawthorne and the Modern Short Story*. The Hague: Mouton.

Shaw, Valerie (1983) *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction*. London: Longman.

Williams, Christopher (2000) After the Classic, the Classical and Ideology: The Differences of Realism, in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds.), *Reinventing Film Studies*. London: Hodder.