Book review

May, Shaun (2016). *A Philosophy of Comedy on Stage and Screen: You Have to Be There*. **Bloomsbury Methuen Drama. London: Bloomsbury, 213 pp. ISBN: 9781472580436**

In his book Shaun May sets out to prove how philosophy, and particularly the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, can be a valuable tool for examining comic films and performances. In a broader sense, then, his study provides a new theoretical framework for comedy criticism and offers a mode of discourse for the analysis of humorous extracts in drama, film and public entertainment. It also enriches scholarly research on the new field of the philosophy of humour (e.g., Amir 2014 2015; Morreall 2009 2015) and, more specifically, shifts the attention from the growing interest in the contribution of significant 19th and 20th century philosophers for the understanding of humour (see Amir 2015; Leite 2015; Shaw 2015; Webb 2015) to the attesting of philosophical concepts in Charlie Chaplin's films, modern short films, absurd theatre, comic TV shows, puppet shows, and stand-up comedy. In addition, May's work definitely departs from the linguistic and pragmatic perspectives on humorous texts (see Attardo 1994). He focuses, instead, on viewing humour as a condition for humanity and part of human cultural universals (see Palmer 1994; Oring 2003; Morreall 2009). Taking up Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*[1] in *Being and Time* (1996), May raises questions about "the fundamental grounds of comic intelligibility" and attempts to address the "hermeneutic conditions" for the possibility of humour (p. 4).

Drawing on different methodological approaches and a spectrum of disciplines, Part One of the book consists of two "Theoretical Chapters". In the first one, the author illustrates his particular conception of "descriptive phenomenology" (p. 25) through a comparative discussion of alternative articulations of the phenomenon, but mainly Ritchie's (2004) descriptive approach to humour. To that effect, he makes extensive use of the fundamental presuppositions of Heidegger's phenomenology—particularly "being there" and "being-in-the-world"—and his radical reconceptualisation of object anthropomorphism. The philosopher's key ideas are first exploited in analysing Charlie Chaplin's humour of transgression of equipmentality, then the issue of anxiety and humour in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, as well as disability humour in Francesca Martinez's comedy.

May's preliminary approach is expressed first in terms of basic methodological considerations, such as: "Why do I think that a phenomenology of humour is in order, as opposed to a theory? And for that matter what differentiates a phenomenological account of humour from a theory?" (p. 19). To support his view in favour of a phenomenological rather than (linguistic or other) theoretical approach to humour he applies a critical consideration of such theories, especially Graeme Ritchie's (2004) paradigm which is filtered through computational humour, as well as approaches by Wittgensteinian philosophers, such as Hubert Dreyfus.

The first part of the second theoretical chapter discusses the existing humour literature of incongruity under the prism of Koestler's (1989) cognitive linguistic concept of *bisociation* as

well as release and superiority theories. Despite a critical stance to the rule-following model of understanding cognition, the author claims that his own account, imbued with an ontological dimension, can enrich the incongruity theory of humour. The second part of this chapter looks into contemporary attempts of creating "a worlded account of humour" (p. 27), further elaborating his previous criticism and forwarding a radical contextualisation of Heidegger's *Dasein* for the purposes of humour research. Specifically, it is shown that object failure discloses the world to us and that anthropomorphic humour distinguishes between *Dasein's* being-in-the-world from the anthropic animal, on one hand, and the non-anthropic object, on the other. Therefore, May criticises Critchley's (2002) account of object anthropomorphism for not pronouncing the ontological distinction, which needs to be catered for, especially in performances. In my view, scholars more familiar with sociocultural and linguistic-pragmatic approaches to humour, and in particular with the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (see Attardo & Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994, 2001), may refer the ontological parameter to the script opposition KR and the context KR (sociocultural presuppositions and metapragmatic stereotypes; see Tsakona 2013).

The rest of this chapter addresses black humour and Heidegger's ideas on death. The author rejects as faulty the distinction between high and popular culture, suggesting a more conscious effort to integrate instances of popular entertainment (such as clown, stand-up comedy and puppetry) into the discourse about humour, and justifies his choice of corpus, which will be analysed in Part 2. An impressive variety of comic performances and films is discussed, ranging from high to low culture: from Beckett's drama, Chaplin's and Marx Brothers' cinematic humour, and contemporary films (Jan Svankmajer's short films, Craig Gillespie's *Lars and the Real Girl*) to contemporary stand-up comedians (Dylan Moran, Stewart Lee) and physically impaired activist comedians (Francesca Martinez, Adam Hills), funny TV sketches in mock-news channels (*The Onion*) and sitcoms (*Peter Kay's Phoenix Nights*), as well as puppetry (Blind Summit and Nina Conti's shows).

The author applies a phenomenological analysis on dysfunctional objects, anthropic objects, anthropic animals, and physical impairment. Broadly speaking, this part outlines the hermeneutic conditions of humour in a variety of case studies. Chapter 3 ("A phenomenology of dysfunctional objects") puts centre stage Heidegger's terminology around the dysfunctional equipment, demonstrating its usefulness for understanding comic phenomena. The profit to be gained from such an analysis of equipmental transgressions and the subsequent disclosure of the referential contexts in physical comedy and the clowning tradition is exemplified through the work of Charlie Chaplin. In the author's view, the referential context constitutes "theatrical imaginativeness" (p. 70) which reveals itself at its best in theatrical failures, such as Tommy Cooper's stage magic and Mr Bean's comic encounters with stage magicians. The phenomenological analysis of equipmental malfunction (Heidegger's "conspicuousness"), temporary breakdown (Heidegger's "obstinacy"), and permanent breakdown (Heidegger's "obtrusiveness") in Chaplin's as well as in Laurel and Hardy's films gives rise to salient observations on mechanisation, and questions the recurrent frame of obtrusiveness as the only possible response found in comedy. Further analysis of sketches from stand-up comedy shows impotent fury as another response to permanent breakdown. However, in the final section of the chapter, when the author attempts to reflect on his methodology and on the ontological modality of the present-at-hand, it seems that the analysis, although enhanced with an exploration of stand-up comic sketches and theoretical review, opens up broader, key themes in humour discussion, such as the theme of absurdity in comedy. Since absurdity may be the end result when "there is a critical distance between Dasein and the activity and/or object" (p. 83), it would be perhaps more pertinent for such reflective considerations to appear either towards the beginning of Part 2, where Dreyfus' (1997) chart of ontological modality is viewed

in parallel with Heidegger's ideas, or in Chapter 6, where the author attempts "to draw out an interpretation of Beckett's *Endgame*" (p. 85).

Chapter 4 takes a phenomenological look into the humour resulting from the disclosure of the theatricality of the context in puppetry, when the audience becomes aware of the incongruity between at least two referential contexts. This is exemplified in a close analysis of *The Table* by the UK-based puppet company Blind Summit and *Evolution* by Nina Conti. Elaborating on Koestler's (1989) explanation of incongruity humour as a case of *bisociation*, the author claims that "in order for us to invest fully into the dramaturgical reality of [such pieces], we need the referential context that contains the machinations of puppet theatre to fall into background" (p. 95), that is, a situation in which the puppeteer is not phenomenologically salient. May uses Piris' (2011) views on the role of the gaze in the practice of *manipulacting*[2] (p. 96) and the role of body schema in comic shows with anthropic objects, in order to address "the *broader* question of what it means for the object to be humanlike" (p. 96; my emphasis). To this end, I think that further work on the satire, parody and other comic modes in puppet shows would shed more light on the semiotics of puppet theatre and the dramaturgy behind such shows. The remaining of the chapter is a close discussion of non-speaking anthropic objects, as in the short films of Jan Svankmajer and the ensuing ontological shifts therein. In addition, the author discusses the film *Short Circuit* as a case study on the humour of robots, elaborating thus on the Heideggerean framework of human *Dasein* and the issue of death. In the last section of Chapter 4, discussion shifts to non-anthropic objects mistakenly treated as anthropic ones, as in the film *Lars and the Real Girl* by Craig Gillespie. Here the author develops his philosophical enquiries on the ready-to-hand-equipment, finitude and emotional attachment to objects, before he turns his attention, in Chapter 5, to the question of the anthropic animal and certain aspects of being-in-the-world, such as temporality, finitude and authenticity.

Appropriately, Chapter 5 sets out to wrap up the issues of self and authenticity addressed in previous chapters. May elaborates on his view that the anthropic animal has unique comic potential, with the help of Heidegger's account of the animal's worldhood poverty, that is, the animal's incapability of existing either authentically or inauthentically. At this point, the author explores the dichotomies of feeding/eating, living with/being with and living/existing. He also suggests that Dreyfus' (1997) account of authenticity as a "'style' in which one engages in one's projects" (p. 131) is at the heart of an existential analysis of dark humour resulting from anxiety as is often the case in most post-war Theatre of the Absurd. The discussion in this chapter opens up to other compelling theoretical claims, like the narratively constructed self. This is partly explored in relation to humans' awareness of our finitude and our endurance of physical changes and metamorphoses. Gregor Samsa in Kafka's short story *Metamorphosis* will thoroughly demonstrate the author's suggestion that narrativity is a tool to understand transitions when humans become animals. In a broader sense, this is an interesting turn in the ontological discussion of Part Two, since the author eventually focuses on bodily failure (disease) and the role of the body in animal humour. Looking into examples of animated TV episodes (e.g. *Family Guy*) he discusses the humour ensuing from the anthropic animal "'collapsing back into animality', thereby disclosing the incommensurable gap between Daseinal and animal understanding" (p. 145). Through the example of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, the author hints at "cartoon physics", an interesting field for future consideration in humour discussion of particular comedy tropes. On the whole, I would suggest that Chapters 4 and 5 are a major contribution to elucidating anthropomorphism in its multiplicity, and how it interacts with contemporary performance and film practises (see also Allen & May 2015).

The last chapter of the book forwards the discussion of the three categories of "malfunction", "temporary breakdown" and "permanent breakdown" in bodily failure. Physical impairment in filmic and theatrical representations of disability is theorised in an existential vein. Thus, temporality as constitutive of *Dasein* is a key concept in this discussion,

while other key ideas, such as the relational nature of finitude and entropy, will be addressed in the analysis of Beckett's *Endgame*. It is worth stressing that such a discussion takes into consideration the underlying concept of *angst* as proposed by the philosophy of existentialism. Specifically, the author suggests that "groundlessness lies at the very heart of the dark humour found in Beckett" (p. 168). More specifically, humour is realised as an incongruity between "everyday intelligibility and the groundlessness underneath" (p. 169). The existential discussion of the play will be illuminated through a joint positive response to Adorno (1982) and Cavell's (1969) reading of it, and a negative one to Critchley's (2004) reading of Beckett and his critique of authenticity. Interestingly, this existential analysis of anxiety and humour is, to a certain extent, augmented with the basic laws of thermodynamics, a twist which readers with a background in natural sciences will probably appreciate. In the end of the chapter, May will draw out a complementary "narrativistic" portrait of impairment, analysing the show *What the f*** is normal?* by Francesca Martinez, an activist and comedian with cerebral palsy, and the work of Adam Hills (a comedian with a prosthetic foot). They both use disability humour to challenge particular attitudes and social structures and suggest alternative ways of (re)presenting and (re)structuring reality. May's choice to study the work of comedians such as Martinez and Hills highlights the philosophical aspects addressed in his book. Embracing the universality of impairment the author finally pronounces the importance of humour in our life as it plays on our finitude, "a fate not as rare or exceptional as we would like to believe" (p. 179).

Shaun May's book is an engaging study of the philosophy of comedy, offering erudite case-studies drawn from a variety of genres. Its main reference point, namely the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, makes it accessible also to undergraduates of philosophy, besides humour scholars. Nevertheless, at certain parts, when the author delves into elaborate philosophical discussions, humour scholars may need further guidance to fully appreciate the phenomenological issues, with which May, but not necessarily the humour scholar, is familiar. The latter might benefit also from well-defined, coherent parallels with socio-cultural and linguistic-pragmatic theories of humour. Crucially, May's research area (comedy on stage and screen) would be of major interest to students and scholars of performance, film, and humour. Its interdisciplinary scope brings into fruitful dialogue philosophy, on the one hand, and theatre, film and contemporary performance, on the other.

Vicky Manteli
Hellenic Open University, Greece
manteliv@enl.uoa.gr

Notes

[1] *Dasein*, broadly synonymous with 'human being' or more precisely a 'being-in the world', translates literally as 'There-being'. Heidegger does not use the term *world* to refer to containment, matter, force and properties. Instead, he refers to it as an ongoing commitment to practises, with specific equipment and the skills that go along with them. Someone's 'being in the world' entails an ongoing involvement with projects activities that matter to them.

[2] *Manipulacting* refers to the practice of the performer both acting and puppeteering at the same time, thus maintaining a presence alongside the puppet.

References

Adorno, T. (1982). 'Trying to understand endgame'. *The New German Critique* 26 (Spring-Summer 1982), pp. 119-150.

Allen, R. & May, S. (2015). 'Encountering anthropomorphism'. Editorial to the special issue 'On anthropomorphism'. *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 20 (2), pp. 1-3.

Amir, L. B. (2014). *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Amir, L.B. (2015). 'Humor and the good life'. *Israeli Journal of Humor Research* 4 (2), pp. 62-73.

Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic Theories of Humour*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, S. (2001). *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, S. & Raskin, V. (1991). 'Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model'. *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research* 4 (3-4), pp. 293-347.

Cavell, S. (1969). *Must we Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons Press.

Critchley, S. (2002). *On Humour*. London: Routledge.

Critchley, S. (2004). *Very Little... Almost Nothing*. Oxford: Routledge.

Dreyfus, H. (1997). *Being-in-the-World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and Time*. Macquarrie, J. & Robinson, E. (trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Koestler, A. (1989). *The Act of Creation*. London: Penguin Books.

Leite, T. R. (2015). 'Schopenhauer's pessimistic laughter'. *Israeli Journal of Humor Research* 4 (2), pp. 51-61.

Morreall, J. (2009). *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Morreall, J. (2015). 'Is humorous amusement an emotion?'. *Israeli Journal of Humor Research* 4 (2), pp. 6-11.

Oring, E. (2003). *Engaging Humor*. Urbane and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Palmer, J. (1994). *Taking Humour Seriously*. London & New York: Routledge.

Piris, P. (2011). *The Rise of Manipulacting: The Puppet as the Figure of the Other*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.

Ritchie, G. (2004). *Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*. London: Routledge.

Shaw, B. (2015). 'Nietzsche, humor and masochism'. *Israeli Journal of Humor Research* 4 (2), pp. 31-50.

Tsakona, V. (2013). 'Okras and the metapragmatic stereotypes of humor: Towards an expansion of the GTVH', in Dynel, M. (ed.), *Developments in Linguistic Humour Theory*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 25-48.

Webb, C. (2015). 'Kierkegaard, Shaftesbury, and the "Vis Comica": Mood and the comic from *The Concept of Anxiety* to *The Book of Adler*'. *Israeli Journal of Humor Research* 4 (2), pp. 12-30.