

Book review

Gérin, Annie (2018) *Devastation and Laughter: Satire, Power, and Culture in the Early Soviet State (1920s–1930s)*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Annie Gérin's book examines the dynamics of the use of satire in the first decades of the USSR. The author skilfully integrates art criticism, art history, and humour studies in order to offer a meticulous account of the various artistic expressions of humour and laughter that the early years of the Soviet regime were rich in. The book touches upon various modalities of humour and different forms of representing satire in the visual arts, and the author's arguments are illustrated brilliantly with pertinent visual examples, such as caricatures, posters, ROSTA windows, etc.

The book begins with an introduction where the author outlines the focus of her research and stresses that she is primarily interested in the “visual manifestations of laughter” and its different roles (pp. 6-7). She also provides an overview of the main theories of humour: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. This overview, although brief, is a good introduction to humour studies for readers who come from outside of this field. Gérin also addresses an important terminological issue often discussed in the humour studies (see, for example, Provine 2000; Kuipers 2006): the correlation between humour and laughter. She explains her preference for “laughter” as an umbrella term, as it was used most widely in Soviet analytical essays on humorous forms and genres in the 1920s-1930s. The author also discusses the social dimension of humour; without going into the details of the ambiguous relation between humour and social reality, she posits that “we can gain valuable insight into society from the study of laughter, since it targets everyday practices and values by playing with expectations” (p. 8). Another pivotal aspect addressed in the introduction is the use of satire as a weapon of propaganda in early Soviet years. Gérin demonstrates how laughter added an affective dimension to Soviet ideology and thus increased the rhetorical potential of propaganda: by using humour, propaganda could appeal not only to reason, but also to feelings, which is what rendered satire so powerful (p. 11). The introduction concludes with an overview of the book chapters and a biography of Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was the People's Commissar of Enlightenment from 1917 to 1929 and thus was in charge of Soviet art, education, and propaganda.

As the placement of his biography suggests, Lunacharsky was not merely an early Soviet bureaucrat. An essayist, critic, and philosopher, he was greatly interested in both theoretical and practical aspects of laughter. Not only did study them himself, but he also established the “Commission for the Study of Satirical Genres” under the auspices of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (p. 19). An account of Lunacharsky's work in the field is offered in Chapter One, “Anatoly Lunacharsky and the power of laughter”. The chapter also touches upon the various manifestations of laughter in Russia from the Middle Ages until the end of the 19th century, starting with the medieval carnival Maslenitsa and continuing with satirical works that superseded medieval humour during Enlightenment. The bigger part of the chapter, however, is dedicated to Anatoly Lunacharsky and his views on art and laughter. Gérin emphasises Lunacharsky's appreciation of laughter, showing that he clearly distinguished satirical laughter

from benevolent humour (p. 29), recognised the fact that laughter is deeply embedded in social reality (p. 31), and placed great emphasis on laughter as a tool of Soviet propaganda capable of “correct[ing] ideological deviation” (p. 34).

The three chapters that follow provide a broader view of Soviet satirical culture in its various forms: print, street performances, theatre and circus, and cinema. The second chapter, “Soviet satirical print culture: A serious affair”, approaches Soviet printed media from various angles. The author offers an overview of the Soviet legislation, which simultaneously proclaimed freedom of the press and deprived all the oppositional print media of ink, paper, machinery, and print shops. Similarly to the diachronic approach adopted in the previous chapter, this chapter contains a flashback into the pre-Soviet satirical press in the beginning of the 20th century. The author also describes various forms of early Soviet print media, including posters, ROSTA windows (“propaganda posters or groups of posters, usually displayed in the morning in the windows [...] of the Telegraphic Agency”, p. 52), and satirical press. The discussion of the latter illustrates how Soviet centralisation worked: while multiple satirical journals targeting different audiences emerged in the early 1920s, only two of them remained in circulation by the end of the decade. The chapter then discusses the targets of Soviet satire: mostly schematised images of the enemies of the Soviet regime, i.e. the capitalist, the priest, etc. However, some forms of self-criticism were also present in early Soviet satirical press, and caricatures targeting corruption and bureaucracy were not uncommon. The chapter concludes by outlining the goals of Soviet satirical press, with Gérin making the curious observation that, in contrast to many countries where satire was mostly used by the opposition, Soviet satire was a tool of state propaganda (cf. Stolyar 2011: 270 on the convergence between Soviet satire and state ideology in the 1920s-1930s).

The third chapter, “Laughter in the ring, in the street, and on stage: The emergence of a satirical scene”, focuses on performative arts. The author shows how elements of theatre, circus, and street performances were borrowed from one art form into another, especially in early Soviet avant-garde art. In this context, Gérin explains the ambivalent attitude towards the circus in the 1920s USSR: on the one hand, it was associated with bourgeois entertainment, yet on the other hand, it was a simple and effective way to entertain and enlighten Soviet citizens. The chapter also discusses a variety of forms of satirical and humorous theatre, from short-lived amateur street performances to plays by Mayakovsky and productions by Meyerhold. At the end of the chapter, Gérin vividly illustrates how avant-garde satirical theatre was gradually replaced by optimistic comedy in the early 1930s.

Similar processes were occurring in the Soviet cinema, which is the main focus of Chapter Four, “Laughter on the silver screen: From satire to optimistic comedy”. The author reflects on Soviet cinema’s position on the boundary between enlightenment and entertainment, and the role of satire in combining these two functions. She shows that satirical films were one of the most widely produced cinema genres, while also pointing to a discrepancy between public tastes and critics’ opinions (p. 114). However, in the 1930s, following the general trend in Soviet art, cinema too became less satirical, critical, and experimental and more optimistic in tone.

Chapter Five, “The strategies and targets of satire”, identifies the four main strategies that Soviet satirical artists employed: collage, caricature, parody, and irony (p. 124). The author explores each of them in detail and adapts the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (Attardo & Raskin 1991) to the analysis of visual humour. She also evokes the idea of *appropriate incongruity* (Oring 2003) – although she does not use the term itself – to explain the mechanisms of laughter production in these forms of visual humour (p. 129). In this chapter, the author also provides three case studies (the Campaign against the Everyday, the Antireligious Campaign, and the Campaign against Trotskyism) and shows how schematic representations of the targets of satire manifested themselves across different media. In all of

these (and many other) campaigns, satire was used to symbolically destroy the “enemies” (p. 171) of the regime.

Chapter Six, “The rhetoric of satire and socialist realism”, analyses the use of satire under circumstances that were entirely different from those described in the previous chapters. Gérin argues that even at the time when avant-garde and experimental art was giving way to the conservative and dogmatic socialist realism, satire still survived and adapted to the new circumstances. In 1929-1930 satire was the focus of debate among art critics, and its role as a weapon against the “remnants of the past” (pp. 179-180) was recognised even after the focus of art had shifted towards representing idealistic visions of Soviet life. Satire lost the prominent position it enjoyed in the early 1920s, but it continued to exist alongside the more optimistic trends in art, helping people to cope with the often difficult present, whereas socialist realism was oriented towards the (presumably bright) future (pp. 188-190).

In the conclusion, the author sums up the main features of Soviet satire and argues that satire is an important element of the modernist project (p. 192). She also describes briefly the status of satire in later Soviet and post-Soviet years, concluding that “from the late 1930s on, satire was never again as prominent as it had been in the first fifteen years of the Soviet regime” (p. 195). At the end of the book, Gérin draws parallels between the use of satire and the attitudes towards it in the USSR and in contemporary Russia (p. 198).

Even though the information in the book is arranged thematically rather than chronologically, two important milestones in the development of satire and the discourse surrounding it are clearly visible: the beginning of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 and the first 5-year plan (1928-1932). In order to trace the origin of Soviet satirical genres Annie Gérin also provides insights into the use of humour and satire in the Russian Empire prior to the October revolution. This diachronic perspective helps the reader to understand Soviet satire better and see how Soviet satirists tried to ridicule the past while at the same time using many of the techniques and mechanisms of humour employed in the previous epoch.

However, despite the abundant historical information, at times I felt that the book could use more social and cultural context pertaining to the first decades of the USSR. Many of the examples that the author discusses would benefit from a deeper discussion of Soviet life, both at the macro- (state politics, economy, etc.) and the micro- (everyday life) levels. Another minor shortcoming is the omnipresence of Anatoly Lunacharsky on the book’s pages. Not only is a part of the introduction and the bulk of the first chapter dedicated to Lunacharsky, but every chapter starts with an epigraph quoting his work and includes references to his opinions on art, satire, and other matters, while his speech “On laughter” constitutes the appendix. Even as I share the author’s fascination with Anatoly Lunacharsky’s work, I believe that his position in the book is somewhat too prominent: as influential as Lunacharsky was, he was certainly not the only foundational figure in early Soviet satire.

In summary, Annie Gérin’s book can appeal to a broad readership: it combines academic analysis informed by humour theory with many fascinating examples and their interpretations; it also offers an account of Soviet visual satire that is accessible to readers without much pre-existing knowledge of the USSR, while at the same providing many intriguing details of Soviet life in the 1920-1930s for those already familiar with the subject matter. Ultimately, Gérin’s book tackles many interesting issues that can inspire future humour-related research across a variety of disciplines.

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