

## Book review

**Sover, Arie (2018), *The Languages of Humour: Verbal, Visual, and Physical Humour*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.**

The innovative collection that Arie Sover has edited is dedicated to Christie Davis (1941-2017), the great British sociologist who devoted his professional attention to humour and especially to jokes. We will all miss his presence in the ISHS international conferences: we all loved and appreciated him; it is with fond memories of Christie and with great appreciation of this remarkable collection of various forms of humour that I write this review.

Sover deems this associating of three “languages” of humour “unique,” and explains that its purpose is to allow a dialogue amongst them so that we may approximate their common origin, while still clarifying each language and providing a tool-box for its use. More than 20 illustrations aim to make this book serviceable for scholars and students of various disciplines, and the international group that the multi-disciplinary authors constitute contribute to the impressive event in humour studies that this collection represents.

17 essays have been chosen out of 41, from such varied disciplines as sociology, psychology, communication, philosophy, history, social sciences, linguistics, computer science, literature, theatre, education and cultural studies. Usually addressed apart in humour studies, the various forms or “languages” of humour, which verbal, visual, and physical expressions of humour are, are bridged in this collection. To study these expressions, jokes, caricatures and slapstick have been respectively used. The collection is divided into three parts, each presenting 5 to 7 essays, whilst Davies’ essay, which opens the collection, is published posthumously.

The excellence of many essays is indebted to their disciplinarity, and within it to their specificity. However, a broader picture is obtained for the understanding of verbal, visual and physical humour thanks to Sover’s decision to narrow down the research to jokes, caricatures or cartoon, and slapstick. Moreover, two hybrid essays, which clarify the relationship between humorous writing and humorous drawing contribute to broadening our view of humour. Once the commonalities between the three languages or forms of humour are clarified, the back cover blurb tells us that a deeper reflection on humour follows which enlightens “in different ways the reality that we live in, and how we can reflect on that reality”.

In the introduction, Sover lists some of the features that these forms have in common (pp. 9-11). He sums up the findings each study brings to the specific language of humour it addresses, and draws conclusions for humour studies out of the recurring themes found in the separate languages of humour. The languages of humour are culturally based, each with a rich history, which Sover relates. The various essays that comprise this collection reflect the similar function the three languages of humour share, he argues. This function is to meet our needs by providing a defence mechanism for difficulties and traumas, voicing social and political criticism, expressing common social values, improving our cognitive and creative capacities as well as releasing tension, ameliorating physical and mental health and providing pleasure. Sover clarifies these functions through examples drawn from the various essays that comprise

the diverse forms of humour, whether expressed in oral or written form, graphic drawings, or body language.

The comparison that Sover makes between the three humour languages also addresses the ways in which they differ. First, the sustained study of jokes has led humour scholars to a better understanding of verbal humour, in contradistinction to caricatures, for example. Second, in contradistinction to jokes and slapstick, however, caricature aims at and sometimes succeeds in bringing about an actual change in the world. Third, slapstick is part of life before becoming an art, which may not be the case for caricatures and jokes. Finally, Sover points to a “comic transference” that takes place amongst the various forms of humour, by which he means that the strategies of one form are transferred to the other.

The collection is divided into three parts, each devoted to one of humour languages. Part One addresses canned jokes. Although humour scholars are familiar with the subject, some of the interest of this part lie in two essays that address jokes in general. They include Davies’ posthumously published essay on jokes and insults, language and aggression, and Asa Berger’s fine contribution, his interesting attempt of explaining how various disciplines approach jokes and his own theory of how jokes work. The remaining essays that comprise this part narrow down the approach to jokes to specific topics (political jokes, situational comedies), cultures (Malta, Soviet Union) and ethnicity (Jewish jokes). Jewish jokes are exemplified this time by Joseph Dorinson’s comprehensive study of Jewish humour through study of jokes on God, livelihood (Parnusseh) and troubles (Tsores). The specific topics that are addressed comprise an interesting study on intertextuality and cultural literacy in contemporary political jokes (Villy Tsakona) and an innovative comparative study on holocaust sitcom jokes in America and Israel (Jeffrey Scott Demsky and Liat Steir-Livny). Two studies address various cultures: Mary Ann Cassar analyses Maltese *Gahan* as an example of humour and liminality, while Nataliia Kravchenko and Tetiana Pasternak address the pragmatics of Russian post-Soviet jokes.

Part Two attempts to understand caricatures and cartoons by focusing either on drawing or both drawing and writing. The latter comprise Carla Canestrari’s study of the interplay between visual and verbal language in “Famous Last Words” cartoons, “Inside Jokes: Identifying Humorous Cartoon Captions Algorithmically”, the combined work of Dafna Shahaf, an Israeli scholar, Bob Mankoff, the former Cartoon Editor of *The New Yorker Magazine* and at present the Cartoon and Humour Editor of the *Esquire Magazine*, and Eric Horvitz, a Technical Fellow and Managing Director at Microsoft Research in the US, which aim at identifying humorous cartoon captions through the use of algorithms. The essays that concentrate solely on drawing include a study of Early Soviet graphic satire, which exemplifies how caricature may serve as a weapon in class struggle (Annie Gérin), a study of the internet political Meme, which remedies the political cartoon (Khin-Wee Chen), and of the French Charlie Hebdo case, which exemplifies the desacralisation of the image that caricature enables (Ayelet Lilit).

Part Three comprises essays on slapstick and physical comedy; it is highly original in the diversity of the art-forms it brings together. Reference to the seminal work of the great aesthetician and film expert, Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humour, and Bodily Coping* (2007) is strangely missing. Paul Bouissac opens by inquiring “Under what conditions can body movements be humorous?”. He argues that slapstick is part of our daily lives long before it becomes part of art. Sover’s essay clarifies the path that leads from circus clowns to the first American slapstick cinema comedians. Evangeline E. Nwokah, Vanessa Lopez and Erin Morrison follow with a study of slapstick humour in children’s popular literature, Terri Toles Patkin explores how classical music is re-appropriated through

slapstick and Vicky Manteli addresses the subject of slapstick in drama, more specifically in staging Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*.

The collection points to the need of synthesising the findings not only of the various disciplines that study humour, as the International Society for Humor Studies does, but of the variety of art forms or languages that humour takes as variations on single themes. This recalls what Henri Bergson has intimated in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911). Sover does not aim to reduce the comical to one mechanism, however, he rather aims at unifying our research while respecting the disciplinarity that professionalism imposes on us. For this reason, as well as for the high quality of the essays this collection comprises, I warmly recommend this publication to all who pursue knowledge of humour in general, as well as of its various forms, either verbal, visual or physical.

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## **References**

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