

Book review

Weingärtner, T. (2013). *Comedy-Boom in Japan: Performative und mediale Rahmung von Humor in der aktuellen Populärkultur* [Framing of humour through performance and medium in current popular culture.] Munich: Iudicium. 430 pp.

Like most dissertations, Weingärtner's book could comfortably be presented in a single journal paper. Its literature review comprehensively presents research on Japanese comedy, but merely mentions the usual suspects in general humour research and does so largely uncritically. The chosen methodology, Goffman's (1974) frames –unsurprisingly equated loosely with Raskin's (1985) scripts– is applied adequately. Yet, the method itself and the theory it is based upon are not advanced. The main section is insightful and could be the core of the suggested paper. The section discusses the frame structure, and the invocation and breaking of that structure, in the Japanese *manzai* comedy genre, in its recent television incarnation. On that basis the study tries to compare TV-*manzai* to adjacent genres. TV-*manzai* is presented as a variant of more traditional *shabekuri manzai*, a genre that originates from Osaka and is characterised by two actor-comedians presenting a humorous dialogue enacted like an everyday conversation. In this dialogue, one of the comedians acts as the *boke* –the funny man or fool– and the other as the *tsukkomi* –the straight man or wise guy– who calls the *boke* out on his foolishness. This format is, of course, strongly reminiscent of the classic double act, familiar from American comedic duos like Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy, a commonly acknowledged parallel that I do not recall Weingärtner mentioning. An Internet search on “manzai with subtitles” will produce videos that can provide the reader with a good first impression of the subject of the study.

If you are at all familiar with humour theory and Goffman, you should skip to section V, the “meat” of Weingärtner's dissertation. In this section, he argues plausibly that the characteristic constellation that differentiates TV-*manzai* from the *shabekuri manzai*, which it is based on, is an additional sketch frame inside a dialogue frame. In *shabekuri manzai* the comedic duo interacts briefly with the audience as actors in an introduction in a first frame and then switches to the comedian role and presents the main dialogue, basically observational comedy in the style of *Seinfeld*, in character in a second frame. In TV-*manzai* the duo steps from the dialogue frame into an additional frame in which they present a sketch. This results in the following three-level structure in TV-*manzai*: the primary frame is that of the comedians entering the stage and interacting with the audience (“Hello, you're such a great audience! – The name of our act is...”). Next, the comedians shift to, or “key” in Goffman's terms, the dialogue frame by stepping up to the microphone stand. Here the comedians stand at a ninety-degree angle to each other, facing both the other partner and the audience. In the dialogue frame keyed in this way, the actors become characters and hold their humorous dialogue in front of and not with the audience. This

frame would be the main one of a *shabekuri manzai* (“Aren’t dogs always so cute? – Yes, especially when you have to pick up their poop.”). The novel third frame in TV-*manzai* can then be keyed from within the dialogue frame (“Let’s tell the story of Pero and his dog. – Okay!”). In this situational frame, a fictional narrative can be enacted (“Roof, roof, I’m Pero’s dog. – Calm down, dog!”) in what is basically a sketch. Characteristically, this sketch is without props, which are shunned in *manzai*.

Apart from humour inside the frames, an interesting observation by Weingärtner is that the keying and –even more so– breaking of the frames can be humorous itself. This is often done by the *tsukkomi* when he calls out a mistake or bad acting of the *boke* in the situational frame, thus taking the *manzai* to the dialogue frame (“You don’t even bark like a dog!”). But breaking can also happen at the very end of the presentation, taking it from the situational to the permanently present primary frame that can be referenced at any point from inside the dialogue or situational frames, according to Weingärtner. Breaking the other frames to return to this primary frame is known as breaking the fourth wall (“You’re crazy! Let’s finish this act!”). In this context, Weingärtner emphasises that problems in the keying and the falling-back to the primary frame actually reinforce the frame that you break.

The study is based centrally on three TV-*manzai* performances that Weingärtner analyses in detail, including screenshots and full dialogues and their translations provided in an appendix. It also emphasises the importance of the sports competition format in which the TV-*manzai* are presented. Apart from the primary, dialogue, and situational frames, this is the second type of framing that gives the study its subtitle. Two subsections contrast the analyses with three acts by contemporary Japanese solo comedians and a discussion of *rakogu*, a traditional Japanese form of comedic storytelling by a single performer. Here, Weingärtner concludes that many elements specific to TV-*manzai* have entered into other comedy genres, because of the dominance of TV-*manzai* in the recent comedy “boom” that the title of the book refers to.

The book has no index, and the appendices of the TV-*manzai* dialogues in the Japanese original and German translation, together with a four-page English-language abstract, follow the list of references. This makes looking up citations unwieldy. There are a few typos, but, overall, the book is edited well. And despite its limited theoretical interest, its methodology is sound and the material it analyses is presented well. If you read German and are interested in contemporary comedy, specifically Japanese comedy, this study is relevant to you. Its style is characteristic of German philological traditions that study a culture as a whole in its history, literature, and language, often with sociological methods and almost always with sociological jargon and sociological style. Yet, Weingärtner’s dissertation is more insightful than most contemporary philological studies because of the breadth of his material –750 hours of TV-*manzai*– and the precision of his analyses and the method applied. Although it was not available to the present reviewer, his 2006 monograph on the *manzai* genre in general, published in the same series on Japanese culture and society edited by his advisor, might be a good companion to the present volume.

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References

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