

## Book review

**Bonello, Krista, Giappone, Rutter, Francis, Fred, & Mackenzie, Iain (eds.). (2018). *Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance*. London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.**

“Are humour, critique and resistance always undivided?” or “Has humour permanently a political orientation?” could be two main questions of this collective volume, which aims to investigate two basic dimensions of this research concern by bringing together critical theorists and comedy scholars, in order to “carve out a new interdisciplinary domain” (p. 4). The first dimension revolves around the existence of a critical function in comedy, while the second one examines whether laughter functions as a practice of resistance. Starting from the assumption that humour is never neutral, as it involves critical, political and ideological effects, the collective volume under review consists of two parts. Part one delves into the three-fold “Comedy, critique and resistance”, which studies the “nature of comedy” (p. 3) and its possible critical dimension, while Part two, titled “Laughter as resistance?”, examines whether the provocation of laughter at the audience could be thought as a matter of resistance towards power. For the investigation of these two research topics, the authors of the collective volume not only examine some theoretical dimensions of comedy, but they also recur to the work of some significant critical theorists, such as Deleuze (1992; 2001) and Lacan (1977), utilising mainly a descriptive analysis and not an exclusively strict academic methodology or/and a single theoretical tool.

Specifically, the collective volume under analysis consists of 14 chapters, including an introduction (chapter 1), divided in the two aforementioned parts. Part one comprises five chapters (chapters 2-6), while Part 2 is composed of eight chapters (chapters 7-14), examining topics in chronological succession. In Chapter 1 (Introduction), the editors, starting from a quotation from Foucault’s well-known dialogue with Noam Chomsky and the acceptance of the ideologically charged nature of humour, briefly unveil the main aims of their collective volume, that is, their goal to explore the interplay between critique and comedy, and humour as a practice of critique and resistance.

In Chapter 2, “Diagrams of comic estrangement”, James Williams places emphasis on a philosophical approach to humour, which underlines the complexity of humorous signs, through the creation of diagrams revealing what is funny or not. Using the notion of *estrangement*, connected with the tension to convert something familiar into something ridiculous, Williams maintains that diagrams of comic estrangement serve as “experimental models for the effects and causes of humour” (p. 27), as they contribute to important transformations of relations in contemporary society, underlining thus the ideological effect of laughter.

In Chapter 3 “Against the assault of laughter’: Differentiating critical and resistant humour”, Nicholas Holm examines the relation between humour and politics. Taking lessons from Twain’s *Mysterious Stranger* (1916), which works not only as “a form of humour theory” (p. 31) focusing on ethical and political dimensions of critical humour, but also as a tool for resistant politics, Holm delves into the function and the importance of (critical) humour in

contemporary capitalist societies, and its difference from aggressive criticism. Nevertheless, Holm underlines that neither critique is always innocent, as it rather reproduces the dominant (neo-liberal) structures of contemporary societies than challenges the status quo, nor humour always constitutes a political act. Hence, following Latour (2004) and Rancière (2009), he proposes an alternative approach of humour, which examines its cultural dimensions and their effects.

In Chapter 4 “Can we learn the truth from Lenny Bruce? A careful cognitivism about satire”, using Lenny Bruce as an example of satire, Dieter Declercq examines the value and the power of satire as a means of resistance. Specifically, he investigates the cognitive dimension of satire in relation to its political influence, trying to find a compromising solution in the debate about whether the satire enhances or weakens the cognitive function. Thus, he concentrates on its connection (or not) with truth, the latter being considered at the centre of satire and often based on ethical motives.

In Chapter 5 “Laughter, liturgy, Lacan and resistance to capitalist logic”, Francis Stewart, following Bakhtin (1984 [1965]), tries to investigate the connection between laughter and the Christian practice, and eventually, through Lacanian tradition, he finds common ground between comedy and liturgy. Utilising the Bakhtinian perspective on *risus paschalis* and the Lacanian theory of *desire* and *drive* to talk about comedy and liturgy (Lacan, 1977), he investigates the function of liturgy in the capitalist context and of the laughter into liturgy as a means of resistance towards capitalism.

In the last chapter of the Part 1, Chapter 6 “Humitas: Humour as performative resistance”, which bridges the two parts of the volume, Kate Fox focuses on the relation between humour and seriousness, in other words, on *humitas* (a conflation of humour and *gravitas*), in different contexts and discourses, and especially on its effect on politics, activism and comedy. Drawing on the Theory of Cultural Pragmatics proposed by Alexander (2005), which gives us a framework applicable to politics, comedy and activism for how and why the blend of comic and serious elements attracts audiences, Fox studies humour “in action” (p. 91) and how its ambiguity connects audiences with public speakers, as humour is often used in political speeches in the name of ‘authenticity’.

In Chapter 7 “Conformist comedians: Political humour in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic”, which opens the second part of the volume, Ivo Nieuwenhuis delves into humour in politics in the eighteenth century in the Dutch Republic, considering that contemporary political satire has its roots in Enlightenment and revealing the conservatism of the satire during this period. As comedians sometimes do not function as critical factors towards power but rather as supporters, the aim of this chapter is not only to present the conformist role of comedians, but also to re-examine the complex link between political comedy and critical thought in its neo-Marxist dimension, through the example of the Dutch Republic’s ‘infotainment’ in the eighteenth century.

In Chapter 8 “First World War cartoon comedy as criticism of British politics and society”, Pip Gregory uncovers the uniting power of humour in cartoon comedy during a period of national crisis, by using the concepts of incongruity, superiority and/or relief (Raskin, 1984; Morreall, 2009, 2020). According to his analysis, cartoons were used as a tool not only for entertainment but also for the criticism of the *status quo* and of the negative options of the War, through their exaggeration, thus reproducing negative stereotypes and divisions about class and gender.

In Chapter 9 “A suspended pratfall: Mimesis and slapstick in contemporary art”, Levi Hanes studies the use of slapstick in contemporary art and how it creates critical presuppositions during reception moment, as he supports that slapstick should not be presented as a threat to the viewer or as a disruption to an event. For this aim, the author examines the significance of pratfall and

slapstick in art, drawing on elements of incongruity theory (e.g. Morreall, 2020) and aesthetic theory (Adorno, 1997).

In Chapter 10 “‘Life’ in struggle: The indifferent humour of Beckett’s prose heroes”, Selvin Yaltir examines the resistant humour of tramp figures in Beckett’s heroes through their ridiculous but liberating presentation. Specifically, Yaltir investigates the sense of humorous ‘subjectivity’ in Beckett’s work, in *Molloy* and four novellas, so as to underline the function of humour as resistance vis-à-vis the contrastive uniqueness and “indifference” (p. 151) of Beckett’s comic characters.

In Chapter 11 “‘Holiday in Cambodia’: Punk’s acerbic comedy”, Russ Bestley concentrates on punk humour, underlining its double purpose, either as a means of ideology and a characteristic of subculture members or as a means of amusement. According to Bestley, this double purpose of satire in punk comedy and bands, strongly connected with rebellion in the mind of the audiences, works as an attempt at subverting both the *status quo* and stereotypes about punks, such as the offensiveness and the sarcasm towards the authority, as punks’ main goal is to “speak the truth to power” (p. 181).

In Chapter 12 “‘What can’t be cured must be endured’: The postcolonial humour of Salman Rushdie, Sami Shah and Hari Kondabolu”, Christine Caruana analyses the postcolonial humour in literature and stand-up comedy, along with the transformation of cruel into laughable. Specifically, Caruana examines Saleem’s satiric narration about India’s story and his own, in contrast to the work of two stand-up comedians, Sami Shah and Hari Kondabolu, through the prism of Bakhtin’s (1984 [1965]) theory of the carnivalesque, studying how the stand-up comedians enhance the comic resistance of postcolonial literature, giving a new form to it.

In Chapter 13 “Political jester: From fool to king”, Constantino Pereira Martins unveils the political effects of seriousness and humour on emotions, as politicians tend to function as ‘jesters’ in political campaigns and vice versa. Specifically, following the taxonomy of Meyer (2000), Martins attempts not only to delve into the rhetorical dimension of humour, but also into the emotional influence of humour on argumentative strategy and, in consequence, into its manipulative role in politics. For this aim, he analyses the connection between humour and politics, based on the example of Tiririca, a Brazilian clown elected in Congress in 2010. This case is not just a matter of laughter, as, from a historical point of view, the ‘jester’ was the counterpart of the king, serving as a critical voice against the *status quo*, and that’s why Tiririca’s election was supposed as a ‘protest vote’.

In Chapter 14 “Three easy steps to a new you? Or, some thoughts on the politics of humour in the workplace...”, Adrian Hickey, Giuliana Monteverde and Robert Porter propose us easy ways to find comic signs at work and, generally, in social institutions, suggesting that the politics of humour can be applied to everyday organisational life, such as the workplace, as a “self-help philosophy” (p. 215) for dealing with difficult experiences.

In conclusion, the aim of the editors of this collective volume is a fresh analysis of humorous discourse and the presentation of diverse views and approaches under the prism of critical distance and resistance. Considering that this book, as it is mentioned on its second (unnumbered) page, belongs to a series dealing with “the experimental thinking about politics and the political” and investigating the different options of politics and political through an interdisciplinary prism, it constitutes an interesting resource for those who are interested in the analysis of political discourse, and not only for academics, due to its comprehensive analysis of the data and the descriptive method which is used in every chapter.

Furthermore, this collective volume presents us with many different domains, beyond the apparent domain of elections, where politics, humour and criticism coexist, such as art, subcultures, literature, stand-up comedy, workplace, and war cartoons. As a result, the collective volume under review enhances readers’ awareness about the complexity of humorous public

discourse, underlining that the critical or political dimension of humour is never unintentional or/and welcome, especially when it comes from ‘marginal’ groups, such as the representatives of punk culture. Moreover, this collective volume succeeds in explaining that, despite the existence of humorous criticism in many domains of public discourse, it does not mean that every joke has definitely a critical intension.

Nevertheless, due to the absence of a common methodology and the adoption of a mainly descriptive analysis of a wide range of issues related to the central theme, an additional chapter at the end of the book could be helpful for the readers, where the main common results of this collective volume would be presented. This would help readers to compare and delve into the basic results at which the authors of this book arrived and their common background. In addition, it would also be helpful for readers and researchers if some references existed as in-text citations in every chapter and not just at the end of it. However, despite these two minor observations, this book remains a useful reading for every person interested in the investigation of the critical dimension in public humorous discourse.

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