

Book review

Rosenthal, Angela, David Bindman & Adrian W. B. Randolph (eds.) (2016). *No Laughing Matter: Visual Humor in Ideas of Race, Nationality, and Ethnicity*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press.

Visual Humour in Ideas of Race, Nationality, and Ethnicity is a part of a series that aims to analyse visual culture from a critical perspective and with an interdisciplinary approach. The foundations of the publication were set by Angela Rosenthal and David Bindman in 2007 when they collaborated in the Humanities Institute at the Leslie Centre for the Humanities at Dartmouth College. The Leslie Centre for the Humanities focuses on inclusivity and social engagement in everyday life and cultures. The volume being reviewed here is an end result of this effort and reflects how visual humour has been a means of classifying, stereotyping, positioning and degrading people of different religions, races, nationalities, genders and identities throughout history. The volume stands as a memorial for Angela Rosenthal due to the sad fact that she passed away in 2010, as she was working on this project.

The volume is the eleventh publication in the series sponsored by Dartmouth College Press. The previous publications in the series focus on many different components of visual culture such as photography, advertising, and art, and elaborate on these components in relation to various aspects of the social and cultural context such as technology, economy, digitalisation, and postmodernism. The subject matters discussed in these publications are manifold and cover a wide range from girlhood to governance.

The editors and contributors of the book come from various backgrounds and are experts in different but related fields of study. This serves the book's aim of analysing visual humour with an interdisciplinary approach. This diversity in the profiles of the contributors also offers the readers a more pleasurable reading experience enriched by different perspectives. The contributions to the book are organised in three main parts, which are preceded by a preface by Adrian W. B. Randolph, Angela Rosenthal's husband, who took over her role as the co-editor of the book after her decease, and an introduction by David Bindman, the other co-editor.

In the preface, Adrian W. B. Randolph, who is a professor of art history working mainly on Italian Medieval and Renaissance art, discusses the functions of humour as a means of expression and draws attention to how humour has been utilised to create a sense of otherness, especially through visual satire and caricatures in different geographies and centuries. He suggests that through the depiction of specific groups as a collection of people with limited and obvious generalities, and especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, humour served as a tool for stereotyping others, and these representations of stereotypes in visual culture were recognised as markers of race in the nineteenth century. The introduction by David Bindman, who is an Emeritus Professor of art history, justifies the selection of contributors. The main aim of the volume was to seek whether a common pattern emerges in relation to how humour is adopted across different racial, national and ethnic divisions around the globe to stereotype and demean others or whether differences can be observed among different divisions, in different geographies

and over different time periods. Whether humour works differently in different media and whether visual humour creates a difference as compared to verbal humour were the other questions addressed by the volume. It should be stated here that the book serves these aims as the content offers analyses of humour expressed through a wide range of visual arts such as paintings, graphics, caricatures, comics, photographs, postcards, and woodcuts as well as through verbal means in different centuries and geographies, i.e. Italy, Britain, Japan, Argentina, America and Cuba.

The first chapter of the book by Kobena Mercer, who is a British art historian and writer on contemporary art and visual culture at Yale University is entitled “Carnavalesque and grotesque: What Bakhtin’s laughter tells us about art and culture”. This chapter defines humour as communal and as emphasising the physicality of daily life rather than abstract ideals by taking Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the “antagonistic interdependence” of laughter and seriousness as its basis. By analysing humour expressed in the paintings by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, the author displays how humour was used as a means for repugnant ideals by stressing the contingency of physical life in late medieval society. In this chapter, Mercer highlights that humour applies to low genres and inferior social classes and that it matters most when human beings feel alive and joyous enough to laugh at themselves as well.

The next five chapters of the book are collected under Part I, entitled “Encountering humor: Racial, national, and ethnic stereotypes”, as they share the common purpose of analysing how the comic ridicules others through stereotypical images. In Chapter 2, “Bartolomeo Passarotti and comic images of Black Africans in Early Modern Italian art”, Paul H. D. Kaplan, who is also a professor of art history, analyses the degrading imagery of black figures in Passarotti’s painting *Merry Company*. The analysis is carried out in a comprehensive style, building bridges between different paintings, poems and songs serving the same mocking purpose in different centuries, especially between the 15th and the 17th centuries.

Chapter 3, “‘If you tickle us, do we not laugh?’: Stereotypes of Jews in English graphic humor of the Georgian Era”, is a contribution by Frank Felsenstein, a professor of humanities at Ball State University. The author elaborates on constant stereotyping of the Jews in different genres throughout the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Shylock, a character in Shakespeare’s famous play *The Merchant of the Venice*, was categorised as Jewish although, according to the historical records that the writer mentions, there were no Jews in Britain during the time as they were expelled from the country in the 13th century. The author claims that an engraving of the actor who played that character by Johann Heinrich Ramberg, in a way shaped how the Jews were represented visually in the following centuries. The analysis starts with a textual analysis of Shylock and continues with many examples from different genres such as anecdotes in jest books, Christian and Jewish biblical stories and commentaries, caricatures, demonic prints, engravings, cartoons and tales. Felsenstein concludes that the demeaning satirical representation of the Jews throughout many centuries can be explained by superiority theories of humour.

In Chapter 4, entitled “James Gillray, Charles James Fox and the abolition of the slave trade: Caricature and displacement in the debate over reform”, Katherine Hart, a Senior Curator of Collections at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, mainly analyses prints of James Gillray that satirise statesman Charles James Fox. The analysis focuses on the role that visual satire played in the expression of criticism during the debate and later during the enactment of the abolition of slave trade with references to the social, historical, artistic and political context at the time. One interesting piece of information in this chapter is that the different representations of races, nationalities and ethnic groups in visual humour, usually with exaggerated physical qualities

and distorted physiognomic differences, can be traced back to Johann Caspar Lavater's claim that facial qualities are signs of character, morality and intelligence and his published work with plates he designed as representing different nationalities physically in the 1770s (p. 77).

Allen Hockley, an associate professor of art history at Dartmouth College, contributed to Part I of the volume with Chapter 5, "The other within", which analyses the racially charged political caricatures of Georges Bigot, a graduate of L'École des Beaux-Arts, who arrived in Japan in 1882 to study woodblock printing and stayed seventeen years in Japan (p. 104). Bigot's lithographs and caricatures display how he used visual narrative to depict foreigners in Japan as racial and cultural others.

The last chapter of this part is by Agnes Lugo-Ortiz, who is an associate professor and specialist of 19th-century Latin American literature and 20th-century Caribbean literature and culture. The title of the chapter is "Material culture, slavery, governability in Colonial Cuba: The humorous lessons of the cigarette *marquillas*". Lugo-Ortiz gives an account of the war of racial humour on the path that led to the legal demise of slavery in Colonial Cuba by focusing on *marquillas*, namely lithographic and chromolithographic prints on the paper sheets that were used to wrap the bundles of cigarettes sold in the shape of a cylinder in the local market from the 1860s to the 1890s. Lugo-Ortiz exemplifies the significance of being able to manipulate hyper visibility as a strategy to get one step further in a rhetorical war of political conflicts, by analysing *marquillas* on which coloured Cubans were depicted as uncivilised people who were, in a way, dangerous to the society.

Part II, entitled "Racial humor and theories of modern media", consists of three chapters: Chapter 7 "Fake nostalgia for the Indian: The Argentinean fiction of national identity in the comics of Patoruzú" by Ana Merino, Chapter 8 "Passing for history: Humor and early television historiography" by Mark Williams, and Chapter 9 "Comical confluences: Racial identity and the science of photography" by Tanya Sheehan. Ana Merino, an associate professor of Spanish at the University of Iowa, reveals how iconographic characters and stereotypes, such as the naïve Indian character Patoruzú, which was created by the Argentinian cartoonist Quintero, can be used to mask tragic events. The character provided politically incorrect information like many other iconographic characters and disguised the marginalisation and colonisation of the Indian people in Argentina. Ana Merino demonstrates how graphic and textual humour is used to create historical allusions. Mark Williams, an associate professor of film and media studies at Dartmouth College, focuses on the racial humour displayed through stereotyping and the representation of racial and ethnic differences among people on early television, which strengthened earlier racialised indexes produced by other actors of the media ecology in his chapter. Williams also analyses the notion of racial passing through the example of Korla Pandit, a popular musician of African American descent, who adopted the apparel style and manners of an upper-class Bengali on early Los Angeles television. The writer claims that television provides the ground for the creation of alien characters such as Korla Pandit. Tanya Sheehan, an associate professor of art at Colby College, elaborates on the relationship between photography and the ideas on race dominating the social scene, especially in Britain and the USA in the mid-nineteenth century. The role that the photographic negative played in modifying skin colour in one stage of the process led to its use as a metaphor for the distorted perception of the Black as filthy, ugly, uncivilised and even evil as compared to the White who carried the opposite qualities, which became a source of racial humour.

Part III, "Performative comedy and race", commences with David Bindman's chapter entitled "Laughter as performance: Some eighteenth-century examples". In this chapter, Bindman addresses the differences between laughter as a physical action and silent humour implicit in a

comment, text or image through examples from 18th-century humour, i.e. burlesque and caricatures. Bindman also reveals the importance of the social context and the object of humour in appreciating humour by questioning whether people react to humour in the same way when they are in a community or alone. He refers to the superiority theory of humour and reminds us that the disadvantaged segments of the society such as the slaves were not allowed to express physical laughter as an example of the significance of societal factors that determine how we react to humorous content. Bindman also emphasises that humour is contagious and an audience in the right mood influences how humorous content will be received. Chapter 11, entitled “Bittersweet blackness: Humour and the assertion of ethnic identity in Eleanor Antin’s *Eleanora Antinova*”, is a contribution by Cherise Smith, who is an associate professor of art history and African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas. In her chapter, Smith focuses on another example of passing. Unlike Karla Pandit, Eleanor Antin, a Jewish performance artist, used the act of passing with the intention of generating humour, according to Smith. In her attempt to adopt the persona of an imagined Black ballerina dancing with the Ballets Russes, Antin made use of the images of Black womanhood and the archetypes associated with ballerinas, and by doing so she revealed the limited capability of these images in representing their signifieds. By displaying the incongruities between her real and adopted personalities in an ironic and exaggerated way, Antin, as a Jewish “White Negro”, pointed to the illusion of integrity and produced humour.

The following chapter, “Traveling humor reimaged: The comedic unhinging of the Western gaze in Caribbean postcards”, by Sam Vásquez, an associate professor of English at Dartmouth College, focuses on the semiotics of colonised leisure reflected in 20th-century postcards of the Caribbean. She not only analyses the widespread signifiers of Caribbean leisure that categorised Native people as marginalised individuals who existed just to attract tourists, but also reveals how these signifiers of stereotypes could be challenged and distorted through humour by using examples displaying how Western tourists were mocked. The last chapter of the book is a contribution by Veronika Fuechtner, an associate professor of German Studies at Dartmouth College. The chapter has the title “Springtime for Hitler every year: Dani Levi’s Hitler comedy *My Führer* (2007)” and deals with the notion of “permissible visual humor, especially on a nationally taboo subject” (p. 295). Fuechtner elaborates on how Levy’s 2007 feature film uses comedic contrast and creates a relief by creating an antitype to Hitler.

No Laughing Matter: Visual Humor in Ideas of Race, Nationality, and Ethnicity is a book that approaches visual humour from an interdisciplinary perspective with contributors from different research areas. The chapters provide examples of racial, national and ethnic humour expressed through different mediums in different geographies of the world in different centuries. Examples of humorous content are contextualised in relation to political, economic, social and cultural factors, and the chronological developments that affected the humour analysed are explained. This publication provides important insights for experts interested in visual humour and its relation to the notions of race, nationality and ethnicity.

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