

## Book review

**Westbrook, Vivienne & Shun-liang Chao (eds.) (2019). *Humour in the Arts: New Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.**

*Humour in the Arts: New Perspectives* edited by Vivienne Westbrook and Shun-liang Chao belongs to the Routledge book series *Studies for the International Society for Cultural History* that aims to demonstrate how people of the past made sense of the world by illuminating cultural and historical processes of meaning-making. The present collection focuses on the humour's potential and usefulness as a method of approaching the texts produced by the Western scholars and writers throughout the ages, from the Classical period through to the twentieth century Surrealism.

Despite the presence of rich literature produced by scholars approaching humour from multiple disciplinary backgrounds, humour studies remain at the backyard of the academia even at present day. *Humour in the Arts* fulfils an important goal by demonstrating the potential of humour to benefit the fields of humanities and social sciences. The authors of the book demonstrate how historical and cultural dynamics of the past have been shaping the development of humour, but also how humour may be applied as a method of study to understand these dynamics.

Each chapter of the book analyses seminal texts of different historical periods of the Western cultures, which may at the first glance seem to be unlikely choices for the discussions of humour, by implementing a method of *reading humorously*. It is an approach, as the authors argue, that can add additional and fruitful understandings of the respective historical and cultural periods which other reading approaches may not reveal. Whilst the book belongs to the field of humour studies, the academic background of its contributors may raise a reasonable concern. With the exception of Jessica Milner Davis and John Morreall, who wrote the foreword and the conclusion to the collection, for most of the remaining contributors it was their first experience of writing on the topic of humour. However, the goal of the book was to attract scholars from a wide range of disciplines with a rich experience in areas such as literature, cultural studies, and the history of emotions; and then to demonstrate how they would implement the method of *reading humorously* to benefit their understandings of the fields they have deep expertise in.

Chapter 1, "Literary humour in English: A short cultural history" by Robert S. White, serves as a foundation for the following chapters. White begins with a general introduction to humour, by firstly presenting its etymology, from what the word originally meant when it came into English during the Norman Conquest to the meaning we attach to it at present. The author further demonstrates how the normative aspect of humour has been developing and changing over time with the emergence of crucial humour theories founded on the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Kant, as well as Freud and Bakhtin more recently, among others. In this manner, White illustrates how the historical and cultural changes, on the one side, affect the developments of humour and how we understand it, on the other side. What was funny ages ago may be unacceptable at present, or become so in the future. Humour may be both "collaborative and therapeutically releasing" and "divisive, potentially offensive, and judgemental" (p. 26).

Finally, White provides an overview of humour in Anglo-Saxon literatures and cultures throughout the ages, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to the works of the twentieth century writers and humourists. The author discusses what were the main “vehicles of humour” (p. 29) such as verbal wit, comedy of character or manners, drama and novel, self-mockery, critique of pretentiousness or rejection of modernity, among others, for the writers by introducing the examples of their literary works. In a similar fashion but each focusing on a distinct historical period, the following chapters demonstrate how the relevant texts to those *époques* can be approached by reading humorously.

In Chapter 2, “Unbidden to the banquet: Humour in the Classical Period,” R. Drew Griffith employs the method of reading humorously to analyse two passages of Classical literature, one Greek (*Women at the Festival of Demeter* by Aristophanes) and one Roman (*Satyricon* by Petronius). Griffith begins with laying out six stock characters of humour in the Classical Period – mooches, flatterers, clowns, quacks, suckers, and bubble-bursters – illustrating how each has originated and has given rise to another. Then, using the examples of the mentioned classical works, the author argues that the interaction of these characters with each other as well as with other characters of the plays is central to Classical humour. The method of reading humorously helps the author reveal the cultural similarities and differences between Greek and Roman humour. In the case of Greek humour, it is the fondness for gallows humour. The author argues that Greek humour was imaginative and philosophical whilst Roman humour was pragmatic. Although the book focuses on the cultures and histories of the English-speaking world, the chapter on humour during the Classical period is important for understanding humour in subsequent historical periods.

Chapter 3, “Understatement and incongruity: Humour in the literature of Anglo-Saxon England” by Jonathan Wilcox, suggests that there is a shared “northern sense of humour” (p. 59), and demonstrates how it is evident in the Anglo-Saxon texts from the fifth to the eleventh century. Few written treaties have survived and most of the literature is arguably unamusing; unsurprisingly, humour has never been a major focus of the Anglo-Saxon studies. However, the author suggests that by focusing on the humour strategies, such as humorous incongruity, a great number of kinds of humour that are at the centre of the mentioned “northern sense of humour” can be witnessed in the Anglo-Saxon texts, such as understatement, overstatement, irony, satire, and parody. Instances of these kinds of humour in the texts do not make them funny, but rather, as the author suggests, illustrate how a characteristic humorous technique may be deployed even in serious works. Whilst the mechanisms of humour creation may be of universal nature, Wilcox shows how cultural specificity may be manifested. Wilcox concludes that there is a lot more to investigate within the context of Anglo-Saxon humour.

Chapter 4, “Laughter and humour in Middle English texts” by Anne M. Scott, focuses on the literature produced by Irish and English writers during the fourteenth century when Christianity was at the centre of people’s lives and thus the dichotomy between the sacred and profane was important to medieval humour, as the author argues. Scott uses the works of such medieval authors as Mannyng, Chaucer and Langland to illustrate the ways humour was expressed in the texts, the social purposes it served, and how the contemporary audience and the authors themselves found pleasure in humour. By demonstrating what was enjoyed by the writers and their contemporaries and what they laughed at, it is possible to understand the nature of humour of that period as well as to get a better understanding of the culture within which it existed.

Chapter 5, “Shakespeare’s Reformation humour” by Vivienne Westbrook, explores the role of humour in the artistic scene of the sixteenth century. Whilst there still has been no understanding of humour as we define it today, writers, musicians, architects, and artists of that period knew how to exploit the power of humour in their works. The ideas about incongruities

of humour, as the author argues, are visible and widespread in the moral codes, scientific discourses, music and other works of arts of the period. In this chapter, Westbrook primarily focuses on the works of Shakespeare, as it was the theatre that most closely reflected the social changes taking place during the sixteenth century. By reading humorously the works of English playwright, Westbrook demonstrates how humorous strategies were used to criticise and make sense of the major cultural forces of that period, such as Humanism and Reformation. Shakespeare's plays are rarely investigated within humour studies, but Westbrook suggests that due to his ability to "treat the most profound issues with seemingly effortless humour" (p. 110), Shakespeare might be considered as one of the greatest humourists of all time.

In Chapter 6, "‘To make fools laugh, and women blush, and wise men ashamed’: Humour in the English Restoration", Lyndsey Bakewell and Sara Read explore restoration comedy that emerged as a response to political, social, and cultural dynamics in the aftermath of the return of the monarchy in 1660, and analyse the attitudes of the audience towards theatrical humour focusing on Joseph Addison's essay "True and False Humour." With the return of Charles II from exile that he spent in continental Europe, English theatre incorporated and adopted European theatrical practices, including the introduction of women to the stage. Violation of social norms and cultural codes, as well as sexually explicit behaviour on stage became a new norm of the English comedy. These new norms shaped the humour in the plays and became a tool of audience attraction in response to the demand. An intent to amuse the audience gave rise to new humorous techniques such as mistaken identity, sexual scenes of chase, farces, and disguises. Humour appreciation is ambiguous and the audience responded in divided opinions concerning the normative aspect of these new techniques. Bakewell and Read use the example of Addison's article to show what might have been considered as true or false humour in the audience's opinion. This chapter demonstrates how reading humorously the texts of this period allows us to shed a light on the social and gender tensions, as well as on what was considered moral or immoral during the Restoration period.

Chapter 7, "Beyond slapstick: Humour, physicality, and empathic performance in G. E. Lessing's comedies" by Pascale Lafountain, focuses on humour in the arts during the Enlightenment period. The Industrial Revolution resulted in an increase of literacy rate and hence in the birth of the public sphere. With a rise of an increasingly aware middle class, the audience in the theatres grew, and during the eighteenth century, one of the most popular humour styles was body humour. This genre has led to a discussion among scholars and writers of that period concerning its morality, as the Enlightenment era is notable for raising the levels of morality. A common assumption was that the comedy of the mind belongs to high comedy, whilst the comedy of the body was considered as a lower level of humour. Lafountain challenges this assumption through the analysis of G. E. Lessing's comedies. She argues that the dichotomy of body and mind, that was widely discussed during the eighteenth century, defines the historical trajectory of humour because the meaning-making as well as humorous meaning-making in the European comedy of that period was expressed in the performing and communicating physical body. Lafountain shows how Lessing used theatrical semiotics in order to increase awareness of the importance of physical signs in comedy and how the body language can bring people together in communication beyond words.

Chapter 8, "Emerson's sad clown: American transcendentalism and the dilemma of the humourist" by John Michael Corrigan, discusses the affirmations of humour made by American transcendentalists, such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Lowell. All of them considered humour as a rational perception of incongruity, as well as agreed that humour is foundational to artistic activity. The duality of human nature expressed in the thoughts of the philosophers is central to the incongruity of humour. Whilst Thoreau and Lowell tried to solve the duality, it becomes clear from the analysis of evolution of Emerson's works that he finds the unsettled duality as a

necessary source of experience and inspiration. Corrigan's analysis of Emerson's Carlini illuminates the parallels between the author himself and the main character of his works: as long as Emerson evolves as a thinker, Carlini follows him. Emerson's evolving thoughts on dualities such as comedy and drama, rational and sensual, Romantic solitude and communal life are visible in the changes his characters experience, and finally the transcendental perception of the self integrates into the community. Reading humorously works of Emerson shows how the author's ideas parallel the emerging cultural identity in America – a democratic mass.

In Chapter 9, "The congruity of incongruity: Victorian intermedial humour," Mou-Lan Wong argues that despite the seeming incongruity of the terms *Victorian* and *humour*, due to our stereotypical perception of gentlemen as stern and the ladies of the era as coy, humour was widespread during the Victorian era. In this chapter, Wong focuses on the caricatures in printed press, as he argues that it was the most famous form of humour. Wong classifies it as intermedial humour – that emerged out of the interplay between text and image newspapers – that primarily became famous due to a rise of literacy and the technologies of mass media production during the Victorian era. This period is prominent for the rapid changes taking place in society in all possible fields of social life. Through the analysis of humorous caricatures and texts printed in periodicals such as *Punch*, Wong comes to a conclusion that the understanding of what constituted enjoyment in humour for society reveals the attitudes and feelings the Victorian public experienced towards the daily changes in their lives produced by the industrial, political, and religious shifts of the era.

Chapter 10, "A tomato is also a child's balloon': Surrealist humour as a moral attitude" by Shun-liang Chao, discusses the specificities and the role of humour in the modernist arts. In their attempt to create something new, modernists violated the expectations of their audience, and the resulting incongruities explain the abundance of humour in literature, cinema, and arts of the modernist époque. However, the primary reason explaining why modernism is tinged with humour is that it originated during or because of "the age of anxiety" (p. 195). Modernist humour was a response of the artists towards the anxiety of the "crisis of belief" (p. 195) that followed the destruction of the physical and mental landscapes as a result of the First World War; humour became a tool to laugh with, at, or away anxiety. Chao firstly lays out the foundation of modernist humour from the works of Freud, who regarded humour as a rebellious act against the reality and as a refusal to suffer. This humorous attitude is traced from the "pleasure in nonsense" (p. 197) derived from our childhood. Further, Chao shows how surrealists, focusing primarily on the works of André Breton, adopted humour to react against the brutality of the century by finding pleasure in nonsense and absurdity, and thus liberating and elevating themselves above the unpleasant reality.

The structure of the book facilitates the process of reading, beginning with Robert S. White's important introduction to our understanding of humour that is coherently followed by the remaining chapters presented in the chronological order of historical development of the Western cultures. Each chapter continues the previous one, and such a coherence helps the readers realise the ways humour has been evolving throughout history in response to political, religious, and cultural dynamics of each period covered in the book.

The book is neither precisely about humour per se nor about cultural history, but may be treated as a methodological handbook introducing reading humorously as a new approach to understand culture through humour. The authors of the book claim its uniqueness in that it is the first volume representing "the dominant form of humour in each period, across cultures, in the broader context of the development of humour theory" (p. 2). This claim might not be completely accurate as all of the covered topics have already attracted the interest of humour theorists, although not in a single volume as in the present one. However, this does not diminish the book's importance for scholarly discussion. The volume reveals the potential of humour for

scholars across the fields of humanities and social sciences. The contributors of the volume have successfully demonstrated this potential while approaching their respective fields of expertise from a relatively new but ambitious approach of reading humorously.

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