Book reviews

Giselinde Kuipers: *Goede Humor, Slechte Smaak* [Good Humor, Bad Taste]. Amsterdam: Boom, 2001. 256 pp. €20.00.

In *Good Humor, Bad Taste* Giselinde Kuipers sets out to describe joke-telling among the Dutch. Her account goes beyond the psychological studies familiar to readers of this journal, where most often the focus is on the evaluation of single jokes by individuals who vary in personality (Ruch 1998). Kuipers' sociological interest is in the evaluation of joking itself, in joking as a social, cultural and communicative process that reflects style and taste and that reveals social boundaries.

The book is based on Kuipers' doctoral dissertation at the University of Amsterdam. Both the dissertation and the book have won prizes in the Netherlands. This book is important not only because it illuminates joking as a social activity, but also because it exposes to the light of data social structure in the Netherlands, a topic to which the Dutch usually turn a blind eye. Because it is regarded as inconsiderate in the Netherlands to speak in terms of social class, Kuipers uses education as its yardstick, distinguishing between the well-educated and the less educated. She takes a multi-method approach to her subject, including interviews, observation, and a national survey. In 1997 and '98 she interviewed 34 joke-tellers and a sample of 32 men and women of varying age, education and appreciation for jokes, drawn from a larger population of 340 Dutch people who were asked to assess a list of jokes, comics, television programs, and humorous writers. The research itself generated controversy when some individuals complained about offensive jokes in the questionnaire (the 40-odd jokes are included in an Appendix).

Since *Good Humor, Bad Taste* is not yet available in English, much of this review is devoted to a description of its contents. The book is divided

into two parts: Part I, "Style and social background," concerns the origins of class differences in the appreciation of joke-telling as a social activity. In Part II, "Taste and quality: The evaluation of particular jokes," attention is shifted from joking as a form of communication to the appreciation of individual jokes, to their contents and form.

The book begins with a historical development of jokes and joking, and the relation of jokes to other forms of humor. In keeping with the *zeitgeist* Kuipers uses an evolutionary metaphor to explain the popularity of individual jokes. Only the fittest jokes survive. Jokes that no one finds funny will not survive, while those that are highly regarded will be passed on to others. Humor is considered a social and communication process for the successful exchange of jokes and laughter.

As in much anthropological research, the role and the assumptions of the researcher are stated explicitly at the outset. There follow three chapters on group differences in attitudes toward joking. In chapter 2 the history and rise of the genre of joke telling is described. Joke telling occurred originally as an oral tradition that has evolved over time to more and more civilized forms, eventually occurring in writing and on the Internet, accentuating words more than behavior. Jokes are bound by rules: they should be witty, civilized and authentic. In chapter 3, "Cracking jokes: Sex, class and communication style," the relative valuation of jokes is explained in terms of between-groups differences in communication style. Joking can be considered a style of communication in three ways: as a social event, as a means of self-presentation, and as a performance. In her sample, women laugh at jokes that men make. To men, telling jokes is honorable, to women it is more of an embarrassment. All the women interviewed claimed to be unable to remember jokes. Kuipers attributes this to both low motivation and a lack of joke-telling experience. [Help may be found in Van Munching's (1997) instructions on how to remember jokes.] To women, joke telling means sharing fun in a relational language, whereas for men joking is individualized fun in an informative and status-confirming language. Furthermore, most jokes are told from a male perspective. The better educated find joking to be dominant, competitive, forced, predictable and disruptive of the social atmosphere. This is also the view that women generally adopt.

Chapters 4 and 5 introduce two empirically established humor styles, which could best be translated as elitist humor and folk humor. Joking has continued to lose status among the Dutch, a process that Kuipers

explains with help from Elias' (1984) notion of the civilization process, our growing intolerance of the violent and the uncivil. The well-educated regard joking as low culture because it is not personal, creative, or "authentic," and because it shows a lack of emotional control. They prefer elitist humor, which, like other forms of highbrow culture, such as art, literature and music, is often ambiguous and ironic. In contrast, "folk humor" is clearly framed as humorous and requires less effort to process. Age, while not a factor in the evaluation of joking in general, did play a role in the appreciation of individual jokes. Older respondents were more easily offended by ethnic and "indecent" humor. Interestingly, informants were aware that there were sex-related differences in joking, but were unaware that differences between social classes also existed. Kuipers tries to establish the cultural logic behind the two humor styles. They differ in their regard for indecent humor. To the less educated, jokes help to create a pleasant atmosphere and are a highly regarded form of communication. Many of the jokes they tell are tasteless or belittle inferior others, which can create a feeling of in-group unity, a tiny conspiracy among those sharing the laugh. On the other hand, well-educated people disliked the notion of telling jokes that are merely passed on, rather than invented. They recognize and understand low humor, but do not appreciate it. Chapter 6 examines the repertoire of contemporary Dutch joke tellers, whose humor often touches on socially sensitive issues, including minority groups and religion.

In part II, particular jokes and individual differences in the appreciation of specific jokes or joke themes are analyzed. Three dimensions appear to establish the quality of a joke: identification, painfulness, and form. Of the three, form—technique, presentation, style—was a far more important contributor to joke quality than was content. The success of a joke is dependent not only on its subject matter, but also on its presentation within a social setting. The joke teller must maintain a delicate balance between entertaining and offending. As such, telling jokes is a risky behavior, and thus not surprisingly appeals more to young, less educated males. "By laughing at a joke, people not only show their agreement with the joke they are laughing at [a la LaFave 1972 and Zillmann 1983], but even more their involvement with the people they are laughing with" (224). In Kuipers' view, the fact that a joke is told is always more important than the joke itself. The contents of a joke can support a point of view, but telling a joke *is* the message. "The appreciation of a joke is a

social process, not only a confrontation between one person and one joke'' (224).

Brevity may be the soul of wit, but it is not the stuff of funny jokes. Kuipers reports a positive relationship between the length of a joke and its appreciation [as did the LaughLab, based on the evaluation of more than 40,000 jokes by 2 million internet users (see www.laughlab.co.uk).] All respondents preferred longer jokes, probably because longer jokes allow for more technique and performance in the telling.

Joke telling is presented in the final chapter (''Sociology of the joke'') as a social and cultural, and a masculine, phenomenon. Social class differences are a question of style, while age differences are a question of the threshold of acceptability, a matter of taste. Compared to other esthetic experiences, humor appreciation is more of a social process than is the appreciation of art or literature. Both in the behavior they elicit, and in their subject matter, jokes are less lofty. Humor, more than art and literature, draws people together in laughter, in 'good humor' if in 'bad taste.'

Although Kuipers informs us clearly about who tells what jokes to whom, she is less informative about the social circumstances in which jokes are told. Are the differences she reports between men and women similar for same-sex groups as for mixed groups? Does the size of the group, or the physical setting, influence either the act of telling jokes or the types of jokes told? Kuipers does not make the most of her quantitative data, presenting little in the way of statistical analysis. In fairness, *Good Humor, Bad Taste* is not intended for a technical audience. Nevertheless, she collected data that could establish the reliability of her observations and the relative contributions of the variables she studied on the appreciation of jokes and joking. Many of her findings regarding age, class and sex can be explained by one group, namely, young, less well-educated males. It is this group that most values jokes, including offensive jokes, and the act of telling them. The jokes they tell tend to confirm some form of superiority theory.

Kuipers' excellent sociological analysis could be extended by a number of follow-up studies. Given her conclusion that culture and social factors heavily influence the joking tradition of the Dutch, how does joking elsewhere reflect local culture? It would be interesting to learn how humor socialization takes place within the family, at school and at work, to understand how the humor styles Kuipers describes are acquired.

Good Humor, Bad Taste is an informative study of joking that offers a glance at Dutch social structure, written in a clear and rich style. The

book includes a 10-page bibliography. Unfortunately, there is no subject index. Kuipers' book will be of great interest to the readers of *Humor*.

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Ralph Müller: *Theorie der Pointe* [Theory of the Pointe]. Paderborn, Germany: Mentis, 2003. 340 pp. €42.00.

You don't need a theory to understand a punch line. However, to explain how punch lines work you do need a valid theory. The author rightly points this out at the beginning and proceeds to give a full account of what a *Pointe* is, not least something crucially different from a punch line, and what it does in a literary text. Although the joke is declared not to be the focus of the analyses, it stands at the center of the initial theoretical chapters as the paradigm case of a text containing a *Pointe*. Here, Müller develops a relevant theory based on recent developments in cognitive linguistics and applies it to different types of text, namely epigrams, anecdotes, aphorisms, and the sketch. In doing so Müller attempts to give those genres more precise and partly modified definitions.

   Despite their common use as translations for each other, it must be clarified at the outset that the German term *Pointe* does not cover

the same territory as the English *punch line*, which is clearly part of the humorous text itself and may trigger the *Pointe*. In contrast to this, Müller defines that at the basis of his study lies "the assumption that the *Pointe* is best understood as the effect of a text on the reader" (23), or, more pointedly: "The *Pointe* is not in the text, but in the head" (103). In addition to the cognitive, linguistic and overall literary focus of Müller's discussion, this would have called for a more thorough treatment of psychological literature and results. Instead, Müller bases his theory of the *Pointe* on the explication of the concept by providing the development of the *Pointe* and similar concepts in the literature as well as its delimitation from neighboring issues.

The explication includes a very detailed account (75 pages) of the history of the *Pointe* in the second chapter. This review covers a time span of 2000 years and starts with Cicero and ends with Raskin, not exclusively concentrating on the *Pointe*, but including humor research in general, in particular from a literary perspective. Overall, this historical overview (sections 2.1 to 2.3) is characterized by a refreshing erudition combined with a proficiency in the relevant languages. Because it includes the general literature on humor as the main domain of the *Pointe*, this section provides a supplement, mainly for German sources, to the humor-research *vademecum* that Attardo (1994) has delivered for many Romance languages and English in his *Linguistic Theories of Humor*.

As the other part of the explication, the third chapter reviews attempts to define the *Pointe* and refers to the usual suspects, like incongruity, scripts, or the discovery of surprising relations, before attempting its own definition that warrants full citation (126):

If and only if a text (1) contains incongruent elements that can (2) be meaningfully resolved through an unexpected connection, and if this text is (3) tectonic and (4) concise and, in addition, (5a) condensed or (5b) has a disruption of coherence or (5c) is presented ironically, then it has a *Pointe* and can evoke the *Pointe* effect. [translation ours]

This definition consists of four necessary requirements (1)–(4) and three additional and alternative ones (5a)–(5c). On the one hand, it is intended to facilitate the identification of a text with a *Pointe*. Therefore it includes characteristics of the text, like (3) and (4). But some of these requirements appear to be overestimated in their significance. This holds in particular for (5c) *irony* ("Uneigentlichkeit" section 3.4.2), which poses a separate

issue that is not endemic to humorous texts or the *Pointe* and the processing of which would have to be described by a separate model. (5c) *Condensation* (section 3.4.3) refers to the paradigmatic presence of a second meaning for part of the text, prominently in puns, which Müller uses as examples. This part of the text, the punch line, is often the trigger for the second meaning, but not necessarily the only one or the first one. The concept of (3) *tectonics* (3.3.1) captures the well-formedness of the text that creates the *Pointe*, in particular its preferred text-final position. These statements make clear that Müller's definition does not maintain a strict distinction between the part of the text that triggers the *Pointe*, in English the *punch line*, and the *Pointe* as an effect, which he assumes to be more central and to which we turn now.

On the other hand, Müller's explication concentrates on the cognitive status of the *Pointe*, most importantly in relation to incongruity in the first two necessary requirements: "the grasping of the *Pointe* is a mental event that is based on the surprising recognition of a connection between otherwise not compatible concepts" (103), or, in more common terms, the *Pointe* is the resolution of the incongruity. On this basis, Müller can postulate that "what is humorous ("komisch") does not necessarily have a *Pointe*, and what has a *Pointe*, does not necessarily have to be humorous" (109). In other words, there is humor without resolution, that is, *nonsense*, as well as humor with only partial resolution. But this also states, more problematically, that there is non-humorous resolution of incongruity through a *Pointe*, such as in problem-solving. More discussion on these issues, much debated in humor research, would have been very welcome. Overall, for those humor scholars who are less interested in literary applications, this third chapter presents the most relevant as the theoretical core of Müller's study.

In a separate chapter, taxonomies of the *Pointe* are presented and the work drawn upon stems from writers like Freud, Wenzel or Auzinger. Müller himself cautions that his is not an attempt at an exhaustive categorization. And this remains the least enlightening chapter, containing an eclectic attempt to adopt and derive useful categories from previous typologies to develop the terminological apparatus for the literary analyses of the subsequent chapters.

In these next four chapters, Müller proceeds to analyze four genres of texts that tend to have a *Pointe*. But a central result is also that not all epigrams, anecdotes, aphorisms are humorous, and even those that are don't necessarily contain a *Pointe*. Furthermore, in those chapters

historical accounts are given as well as a description of subtypes and sketches of their internal organization. These chapters will be the most relevant for literary scholars who are interested in the respective genres. The fifth chapter, on the epigram, focuses on the example of German authors of the seventeenth century. Chapter six, on the anecdote, contains an interesting attempt to delimit its topic from the joke: The anecdote is considered to be about the person, while the joke is about the punch line (218). Not as much of Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief may be required for the situation depicted in the anecdote as for that in the joke, but it must be credible with respect to the characteristics of the main person and circumstances. Chapter seven, and especially chapter eight present less of a unified account of the genres aphorism and sketch in the light of the theory developed by Müller, but rather several more or less connected and theoretically founded analyses that do not always carry the discussion with the main focus of the *Pointe*. These four chapters cannot fully capture the genres they are about and are confined to narrowly selected sample corpora, but they successfully define these genres with respect to the function of the *Pointe* in them. A rather short chapter of three pages concludes the work.

All in all, *Theory of the Pointe* is a very interesting piece of research in as much as it goes beyond the classic analysis of jokes. The book, based on the doctoral dissertation of the author, is informative and well written and also contains superb examples of that topic under discussion. While the present work is a fine example of a contribution mainly from linguistics and for literary studies, it occasionally also incorporates selected work from other disciplines, such as philosophy and psychology. The book will be important to those interested in linguistic research in humor and the differentiation of forms of humorous texts. It serves well as a German introduction to the field. Furthermore, this book and its bibliography testify both to the rich tradition as well as the vibrant contemporary research in humor in the German-speaking countries. Unfortunately, much of it goes unnoticed by the international research community due to the language barrier. Luckily, part of Müller's work on the *Pointe* in German research is already available to the readers of *HUMOR* (16-2, 2003: 225–242), and we hope to see further publications in English.

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Isabel Ermida: *Humor, Linguagem e Narrativa: Para uma Análise do Discurso Literário Cómico*. Coleccao, Poliedro: Universidade do Minho, 2003. 352 pp. €17.00.

Based on a doctoral thesis, *Humor, Linguagem e Narrativa* is a rigorous study of the humor mechanisms as far as English literary narrative comedies are concerned. In this interesting book, Ermida brings together humor and linguistics, guiding the reader through interdisciplinary fields such as pragmatics, semantics and discourse analysis.

Methodologically, this study is based on Raskin's (1985; Attardo and Raskin 1991) and Giora's (1991) linguistic theories of humor which focus on jokes. Ermida's stated goal is to assess the pertinence of these theories for the comprehension of humor discourse strategies when dealing with longer comic narratives. Her point of departure is the global understanding of the humorous text, paying particular attention to its macrostructural level.

Humor, Linguagem e Narrativa consists of five chapters, each of them including an introduction and a conclusion. This consistent format is a clear and an accessible way of presenting and summarizing the concepts as well as of marshalling an impressive range of information.

In the first chapter, Ermida clarifies her understanding of humor in lexicological terms, adopting the Anglo-American posture and distinguishing humor from laugh, wit and irony. She examines the three main theories of humor which correspond to cognitive-perceptual, social-behavioural and psychoanalytical perspectives. As Raskin (1985: 31) puts it, "the first class is usually associated with incongruity; the second one with disparagement; the third with suppression/repression." Ermida does not fail to point up Kant's and Schopenhauer's theoretical contribution to the incongruity theory. Moreover, she describes the disparagement theory starting with Plato's and Aristotle's emphasis on the aggressive side of humor, referring to Hobbes' (1995 [1651]) "sudden glory" concept of humor and to Bergson "for whom humor is a social corrective, i.e., used by society to correct deviant behavior" (Attardo 1994: 50). Ermida is consistent in showing the social and interpersonal stress given by the hostility theory which makes it particularly useful for a sociolinguistic approach. This first chapter also provides a description of the release theory, having Freud as its most notorious proponent. Not forgetting her targeted narrative texts for her study, Ermida explicates the humorous communicative act and postulates that, in literary comic terms, in

spite of interacting, stimulus and reaction do not appear simultaneously (66).

The author devotes the second chapter to the linguistic mechanisms responsible for humor, but she rightly affirms that some jokes are independent from their verbal support. In fact, this position is intimately tied to Cicero. According to Attardo (1994: 27), "in Cicero's terminology jokes (*facetiae*) can be 'about what is said' (*dicto*) or about 'the thing' (*re*)."

Ermida highlights the importance of discourse strategies such as formal and semantic manipulations among which it is possible to mention word play, rythm, rhyme, phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic ambiguity, as well as incongruity and the absurd logic which are often in the origin of humor. Nonetheless, the author argues that the real essence of humor is beyond any microlinguistic description, since the implicit linkage between humor and its cultural and translinguistic dimension is undeniable (109). In fact, humor is successful if "sender and recipient" (Chiaro 1992: 11) share the cultural inferences and if the latter is willing to accept his or her role play as victim of the joke, cooperating in the domain of the principles theorized by Raskin (1985: 103) as an alternative to Grice's Cooperative Principle of Conversation (1975).

Nevertheless, it is in the third chapter that Ermida examines critically Raskin's Cooperative Principle for the non-bona-fide communication mode of joke telling, as well as his semantic script theory of humor (SSTH) based on the concept of script as "a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker and it represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world" (Raskin 1985: 81). This notion of script is divided into two different types: linguistic and non-linguistic. The scripts which are not based on the lexicon of a natural language may belong to general, restricted or individual knowledge. In the case of a joke, its text involves two different scripts. Although those scripts are opposite in a defined sense, there is always an element (the "trigger") responsible for the switch from one script to the other. The relationship between the two distinct scripts may belong to ambiguity or contradiction.

At first glance, humor discourse seems not to be committed to the principle of truth which postulates that language should transmit only the real world, but within this specific context, speaker and hearer must be cooperative according to Raskin's maxims which rule the communication when the mode is non-bona-fide. Taking these assumptions

into account, Ermida asserts that the speaker's commitment to truth is replaced by the commitment to humor which is shared by the inter-locutor who understands a joke as conveying a different truth not related to the values of other situations of conversation. While conceiving humor as a communication act in which the participants play a very important role, Raskin's theory assumes, in Ermida's words, a pragmatic dimension.

Keeping her main purpose of understanding the longer textual dimension of humor, the author of *Humor, Linguagem e Narrativa* explores other proposals of humor linguistic models among which there is place for Morin's narratological analysis (1966), Nash's comic expansion (1985), Chlopicki (1987), who postulates that the SSTH is a theory with applicability to any humorous text, Palmer's semantic-pragmatic model (1988), Holcomb's nodal humor in comic narrative (1992) and Attardo's linear organization model (2001). After describing all these proposals, Ermida concludes that the question of humorous short stories analysis is still in its embryonic stage, but she recognizes that the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) (Attardo and Raskin 1991), revised version of the SSTH, is the one that is concerned with the response to the above topic in discussion (166). Notwithstanding the intention of bearing in mind any type of humorous text, this linguistic theory works only with a *corpus* which consists exclusively of brief classic jokes, neglecting the study of longer narrative texts. This is also the case of Giora's (1991) model of marked informativity. She explains the cognitive and operatory principles which rule ''the conditions for joke well-formedness'' and concentrates her study in semantic ambiguity based jokes.

The fourth chapter of the book centers on the structural and pragmatic principles of humor narrative construction, starting with the theoretical presuppositions of narratology. The author's studying perspective contemplates the text and the context levels, enhancing the pragmatic dimension of narrative and its theoretical implications. In addition, Ermida discusses the issues raised by both the structural and the descriptive narratological approaches, purporting that the singular case of humorous narrative should be understood as a specific communicative act edged with particular conditions of textual production and reception where the rules are dictated by the principle of interactivity. The chapter ends with the assumption that, albeit the diversity and the richness of the texts analysed in this book, it is possible to find certain common characteristics which answer for the process of creating and reading humor.

This point is picked up in the fifth chapter which is devoted to the study of the humorous tale according to an alternative approach under a supra-scriptic perspective which accounts for the existence of a set of semantic oppositions with relevance to the comic consummation. The striking feature of this chapter is the construction of the hypothesis that every humorous narrative text should respect some principles defined in terms of semantic opposition, hierarchy, recurrence, informativity and coopera-tion. This section of Ermida's book provides a detailed study of seven markedly heterogeneous humorous tales divided according to the specific intention of the analysis. Thus, she begins with *The Lunatic's Tale* (1991 [1975]) from Woody Allen and proceeds with *The Norris Plan* (1990 [1927]) from Corey Ford, *On Guard* (1956 [1936]) from Evelyn Waugh, *You Were Perfectly Fine* (1990 [1939]) from Dorothy Parker, *Laughter in the Basement* (1990 [1950]) from Peter de Vries, *A Shocking Accident* (1990 [1972]) from Graham Greene and finally *Hotel des Boobs* (1987 [1986]) from David Lodge.

Despite the stylistic and the thematic differences explained by the diver-sity of times, geographies and writers, the analysis confirms Ermida's hy-pothesis. Nevertheless, she raises two points. One is concerned with the virtual existence of non-humorous narrative texts following the same principles presented in the book as specific humor strategies. About this particular matter, the author argues that the detective stories, for in-stance, consciously organized on the basis of surprise differ from humor-ous stories because of the role played by the writer who can assume to-wards the reader a cooperative or an opponent behavior. The second question is related to the potential argument that some humorous narra-tive texts don't fulfil the requirements of Ermida's hypothesis which might be the case of absurd humor, but she proves there is no point in claiming that.

In sum, *Humor, Linguagem e Narrativa* provides a relevant and clear linguistic study which bridges the gap between narratology and textual linguistics not neglecting the literary criticism. Undertaking an eclectic theoretical and methodological attitude, Ermida offers a highly valuable contribution to the comprehension of the semantic and discourse humor mechanisms in literary narrative comedies.

An important strength of this book is the author's commitment to work with a discourse reality more complex than the joke. This proce-dure is particularly interesting in the sense that there were no semantic or pragmatic instrumental tools to analyse the literary comic discourse.

It has to be mentioned that Ermida has produced a truly magnificent work of reference, taking into account the English and American linguistic and cultural circumscription of the *corpus* in analysis. *Humor, Linguagem e Narrativa* is a pioneer study in the field of the humor linguistic investigation in Portugal and it can be recommended as a valuable addition to the libraries of those working in discourse analysis, humor or linguistics.

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               York: Oxford University Press, 118–132.

James D. Bloom: *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America*. Westport: Praeger, 2003. xvi + 192 pp. $62.95.

James Bloom teaches a course on ''Funny Jews'' (his description) at Muehlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, hard by the Presbyterian Church where already six generations ago my family worshipped. Gravity has not failed us and Newton still rules with Jovian strength. Timeless, our world attracts mockery and unshapes it all. Portray us as Lemuel Pitkin and Nathan ''Shagpoke'' Whipple if you will; we are amused. Speak to us like Hyman Kaplan and we will chuckle. Deride Irvington in the festive season and we will smile like the figures on our lawns. I tell you all this nonsense in order to make the point that Bloom has written a book for specialists and for those who already know much about the subject. As such it is an excellent and also well-indexed book and will be an encyclopaedic work of reference for those who wish to locate, say, Lenny Bruce or Nathanael West, Philip Roth or Phil Silvers (Sergeant Bilko) in their own times, in relation to their contemporaries

and in relation to the by now revered tradition of Jewish humor in America. However, it may have limited appeal in American Gothic Iowa. *Gravity Fails* is too detailed and too concerned with metropolitan literary opinion to attract a wide readership; the bibliography reveals that Bloom has an unparalleled collection of cuttings from the newspapers and magazines of New York but that is a restriction as well as a strength.

Gravity Fails provides a detailed description of the work of the ''Funny Jews'' under headings that speak for themselves ''Chutzpah in the Promised Land,'' ''The Revolt of the Horny,'' ''Talking Heads, Shrinking Heads,'' ''Nazi Follies,'' and ''A Blonder Shade of Dark.'' It is interesting and insightful but the title is an overstatement. *Gravity Fails* is about the shaping of American humor not about the ''Shaping of America.'' When the ''serious'' world intrudes, as it must, Bloom does not have the sure touch he shows when discussing Jewish humorists. *Gravity Fails* leaves the reader with the impression that the Cold War was a cultural phenomenon arbitrarily invented in America by Roy Cohn et al. It is doubtful whether the people of Seoul or Berlin, Prague or Budapest, or indeed the victims of Soviet anti-Semitism saw it that way.

Humor is time-off from a hard material world and in America humor is provided by funny Jews. Jews are successful in all aspects of American life but in humor they are supreme. Three percent of the population own 80% of the jokes, a very skewed Genie-curve indeed. James Bloom's book is a detailed account of all the great funny Jews with an American connection from Jack Benny and Henny Youngman to Alan Kaliningrad and even from Richard Feynman to Franz Kafka. Only Norman Rosten is misnamed and all but ignored. Leonard Q. Ross's real name was Leo Calvin Rosten; Rosten was probably named after that terse master of American understatement, Calvin Coolidge who is still famed for his half-liners. Without the ''funny Jews,'' as Jules Feiffer (cited by Bloom) put it, ''Humor was still Bob Hope.'' That's a pretty nasty thing to say about America and it is made worse by the fact that it is true. Hope without angst, Hope without literacy, and Hope without irony, that was American humor at mid-century. Angst, literacy and irony, these three things were Jewish comedy's gift to America. James Bloom and John Lahr are right. The ''funny Jews'' did reshape comic America. They were a footlight unto the nations.

University of Reading   CHRISTIE DAVIES

Lisa Colletta: *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 150 pp. $59.95.

Discussions of dark humor in literature seldom mention female writers or British writers. In this short, engaging book, Lisa Colletta criticizes the neglect of both and argues that four British novelists writing between the two World Wars—Virginia Woolf, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Evelyn Waugh, and Anthony Powell—produced not only dark humor but a new kind of Modernist social satire.

   Traditional discussions of satire often claim, or assume, that satire is intended to correct deviations from a stable set of values, so that satire is incompatible with Modernism, which rejects commitment to a stable set of values. But Colletta argues that in the 1920s and 1930s a new kind of satire arose in Britain that was neither socially reformative nor committed to any value-system. Its characters evoked laughter, but nothing was supposed to follow from that laughter, except perhaps an enhanced ability to get along in an absurd world.

   Colletta does not define satire or modernism, but she appears to understand satire as a critical representation of persons which prompts us to laugh at them, and Modernism as a worldview which rejects Enlightenment assumptions about the world and the human person being rationally ordered. The novels she discusses, with their focus on alienation, instability, fragmentation, and mechanization in modern life; as well as their ambivalent narrative styles, confused chronologies, unreliable narrators, and plots that go nowhere, are Modernist, she argues, even if they lack such standard features of Modernist novels as formalist experimentation.

   What happened in the early twentieth century to create this new kind of Modernist satire in Britain? A big part of the answer is World War I, a pointless conflict that claimed the lives of one-third of young British men and increased people's feelings of isolation, ennui, and meaninglessness. In the decade after the war, despite an economic recovery, feelings of absurdity did not go away, especially for the upper class, to which the four writers examined in this book belonged. They wrote from a position of privilege but thought of that privilege as itself irrational (12), so their novels portrayed pointless lives at which readers, and even the occasional character, could laugh.

   One humorous aspect of the characters in these novels is their inability to adapt to their constantly changing roles in society. Like the Charlie

Chaplin character in *Modern Times*, they could not keep up. The epigraph to Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, a line taken from Lewis Carroll, is illustrative: "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

Laughter at the absurd lives of these characters, Colletta says, offered readers "a pleasurable defense against forces that would reduce them to interchangeable mechanical parts in a vast machine" (20). She contrasts such readers' reactions with the reaction that Robert Polhemus attributes to readers of late nineteenth-century comedy. In that time, he says, though people's commitment to traditional beliefs and institutions was waning, comedic literature offered them meaning and even hope. Indeed, "the basis for believing in the value of life can be found in the fact of comic expression itself" (20), so that late Victorian comic literature took over some of the functions of traditional religion. But after World War I, this hope had disappeared from humor, at least among British writers. All that was left was the laughter. Here Colletta turns to Freud's explanation of humor as the ego's triumph over a threatening world. "When external reality threatens the stability of the individual from all sides, dark humor allows for the triumph of narcissism, the protection of the individual, and the pleasure of laughter" (13). By making satire out of their pointless lives, these writers had a bit of fun and kept their sanity.

In Chapter 2, Colletta discusses Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose lead character protects herself from the stress of war, illness, and a passionless marriage by holding carefully arranged parties. It is not Clarissa Dalloway herself who survives through seeing humor in her situation, but readers of Woolf's novel. Chapter 3 analyzes Ivy Compton-Burnett's *A House and Its Head*, a dark domestic comedy about a tyrant father and his dysfunctional family. Some family members do not survive his cruelty; but those with wit do. Their word play is not aggressive enough to constitute rebellion, but it preserves their egos and their sanity. Chapter 4 is devoted to *Vile Bodies*, an early satire of Evelyn Waugh, in which, Colletta says, not just modern society, but "all of Western culture's constructs, from religion and government to codes of gentlemanliness, are bankrupt" (15). As is typical in these novels, the characters in *Vile Bodies* do not see their lives as humorous; it is rather the narrator and the reader who has the comic distance to laugh (15). The last chapter is on Anthony Powell's first novel, *Afternoon Men*, where the humor is about the numbing routine of social life among the British upper class in the 1920s and 1930s. Work, parties, and even sex brought them no

personal satisfaction. They lived in melancholy. But Powell presents their story wittily in understated dialogue.

While Colletta presents clearly the tedium and pointlessness of the characters' lives in all four books, the comedy is often harder to discern. But this is a general problem with the whole genre of dark comedy, which includes so much absurdity and so often comes close to tragedy that it is hard to apply traditional comic theory to it. If we are to count Powell's *Afternoon Men* as dark comedy, then why not Sartre's *No Exit*? Colletta herself hints at this problem when she quotes Thomas Mann's comment that the modern novel "has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic ... and sees life as tragicomedy" (35). To the extent that dark comedy is a useful category, however, Lisa Colletta has made a significant contribution to understanding it, especially in relation to Modernism.

College of William and Mary   JOHN MORREALL

Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon (eds.): *Comics & Ideology*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. 303 pp. $29.95.

Comics and syndicated comic strips in newspapers have, for over a century, been a central feature of American popular culture enjoyed by large audiences, not least adults including, perhaps surprisingly, well-educated readers and viewers. They still remain, however, a neglected area for humorologists perhaps because they properly require semiological analysis of their contribution to visual culture, as well as semiotic/semantic analysis of the language content of their characters' thought and speech balloons essential to their story lines. As neatly summarised by the American cartoonist and communication scholar, Randall P. Harrison (1981), the modern comic strip uniquely constitutes a "communication which blends word and picture, dialogue and action, literature and art" (86).

This book of essays contains no less than twelve contributions from authors in the USA and Far Eastern countries predominantly. Their common theme of comics and ideology importantly redresses our ignorance of the many sociocultural functions comic books and comic strips reflect, centrally issues of social power and ideology as seen through diverse theoretical perspectives ranging from cultural studies to mythic analysis. The

contributors furnish critical accounts of the various forms of comic art examined even where these are not normally of interest to the humor scholar. In the latter case, the textual analysis of the first Feminist Comic in Hong Kong contrasts markedly with its companion on Japanese Comics for Men which are totally devoid of humor and comic spirit reflecting the acknowledged rigid role divisions and ethnocentrism in the latter society. This poses a question as to why such Bergsonian mechanistic attitudes and depicted actions in Japanese comic art have yet to succumb to the more challenging humor of its Anglo-American prototypes as exemplified by the humor of feminist women comic artists in Hong Kong with their direct attacks on traditional gender roles and stereotypes, as well brought out by Wong and Cuklanz.

Of central interest to humorologists is Matthew Althouse's discussion of a newspaper comic strip, more obviously for politically alert audiences, printed in England's *Daily Star* beginning in 1981 almost simultaneously with the succession of right-wing conservative governments led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. This resplendent strip featured fictitious stories in the futuristic world of Meta City involving its principal character, Judge Dredd, who is described as a ''sardonic antihero within stories which have a satirical twist.'' Set within the socio-political context and ideological debate concerning the rise of the British ''New Right'' and the social implications of Thatcher's policies, the strip clearly resonated with the newspaper's readers' deconstruction and co-authorship in relation to social exigencies. Using Roland Barthes' notion of myth and his semiological systems schema, Althouse interestingly demonstrates how the comic strip has the potential for equivocal readings (ironies, inflections and contradictions of meanings) of such a mass-mediated text which, in this case, invites a debate about the ''myth'' of Thatcherism in England during the 1980s. This study deserves to act as a model for analysis of similar adult comic strips whose artists similarly use satire as well as a sardonic tone in their comic art. Also, in the British case, the distinctly adult comic strip in similar satirical vein produced at the same time in the broadsheet *Guardian* newspaper entitled, ''As ... If'' by Steve Bell, will, in the opinion of this reviewer, have to be critically appraised and used as a myth-dispeller in any future sociocultural or politicocultural reading of the 1980s and 90s in that country.

The other notable contribution which confirms that comics live up to their name by employing humor, albeit of a wry and mordant kind, is by Julie Davis in her ideological reading of the influential comic strip

character Dilbert (a pot-bellied engineer) and his co-workers which has a massive 150 million daily readers and is not only syndicated in America, but world wide. Not only does it expose the excesses of the American business system, it acts as a comic corrective in helping audience members to cope with them. This interestingly affirms the blurring of social control and resistance functions of humor in such comic strips whilst confirming the widespread deployment of humor with such functions by employees (managerial and shop floor) in real-life work organizations, especially in Anglo-American cultures (Paton and Filby 1996). The Marxian concept of "false consciousness" is employed by way of ideological critique in understanding the rhetoric of cultural texts, especially sub-texts, revealing unfair economic and social relations and value systems while also perpetuating them and their cultural forms.

The comic strip is thus one such rhetorical form whose media images and humorous messages might lay the groundwork for social change by exposing the flaws in the current ideology; in this case, the continued American addiction to the Protestant work ethic. One sub-genre of this art form, however, is the more common supportive comic strip, with its non-threatening humorous manner, which encourages its audience members trapped in alienating workplace conditions and issues to cope more resignedly with their real-life frustrations and miseries by identifying with those portrayed by the fictional *Dilbert* in this case. One of the interesting sidelights of Davis' study is the revelation that the comic strip's artists, Scott Adams, utilizes fan e-mail feedback (containing readers' feelings about their work life) as a trigger for ideas in his strips. This further underlines the importance of such humor to the understanding of what Erving Goffman long ago hinted at; namely, a sociology of failure. Thus, such comic strips as *Dilbert* accentuate the common practice of its readers and our relativizing of the disappointments and failures we experience in our real lives.

Although of less interest to humorologists, Franklin's essay on the treatment of "coming out" of gays and lesbians in comic books is valuable in stressing the need for a meaningful discussion of readers' reactions through their letters to comic book editors as examples of bounded social knowledge. Her suggestion of the need to examine appropriate web sites as a new avenue for research on comic book audiences is a welcome reminder to researchers to learn more about this medium which, for her, holds amazing potential for social interaction and commentary, not least in our case surely humorous forms of all kinds. Ed Sewell's contribution

on ''queer characters'' in comic strips further reinforces the need to critically examine the semiological and semantic aspects of the ''narrative scripts'' for queer characters in comic strips, however obliquely presented in their coded references which go back as far as 1936.

This collection of commissioned essays, then, marks a significant addition to the literature on popular culture because it focuses attention on a surprisingly under-researched genre — comic strips. It is clear that this is a greatly underutilised area for exploitation both by teachers and researchers. This book, therefore, should act as a guide to inducting undergraduates (many of whom clearly are comic strip readers) into the serious, but not solemn, study of a number of humor-tinged areas touched on by the contributors, not least gender relations, organizational culture, and democratic political policy-making impact on society. For humorologists in particular, it should not only be required reading for their students in humor courses, but hopefully inspire more sustained studies of comic strips along sociolinguistic lines suggested by Goffman in his unjustly neglected book, *Forms of Talk* (1981).

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