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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Humor, life, and everything nice

Review by Áron Bakos

Humour, Comedy and Laughter. Obscenities, Paradoxes, Insights and the Renewal of Life

by Lidia Dina Sciama, ed.

Berghahn, 2016

Considering its importance in our everyday existence, humor is an aspect of universal human behavior, that has not yet received the scientific attention it deserves. This alone could be a reason to warmly welcome a collection of studies that analyze humor and some closely connected phenomena from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The volume, with its nine chapters, presents case-studies from a very wide range of topics, such as the childhood development of reactions to and performances of the comic, the role of the ludic element in fieldwork, an ancient Chinese physician's memoir, a historical review of American comics, joking situations in an international work environment, humor in science fiction films, English pantomimes, Italian folksongs, and finally, one of Goldoni's plays and its local reception. Such diversity of topics, combined with their different empirical background and the reflectively open, interconnected approach towards humor that does not intend to sunder the concept from synonymous constructs confers the volume a certain eclectic character.

On the one hand, this eclectic character is a positive feature, as such an approach sheds light upon the different sides of the same phenomena and, with the consecutive reading of the chapters, one is able to see how backgrounds in different disciplines lead to different evaluations of humor. Ian Wilkie and Matthew Saxton draw an interesting parallel between adult humor, comic performances and the childhood development of humor, listing and analyzing the features of humor that appear in both contexts. Judith Okely points out how the ludic experiences during fieldwork – embedded in their

highly personal, biographic context – might lead to revelations that enable anthropologists to recognize aspects of the cultural Other that would otherwise be hardly accessible. A similarly cognitive-level approach is followed by Elisabeth Hsu, who, after a detailed theoretical introduction, presents a close and philologically precise reading of her ancient Chinese source and understands humor as a way of comprehending the ultimate mysteries of life, that is, the mysteries of birth and creation. Ian Rakoff is the only author of the volume who, instead of focusing only on the lighter side of humor, points to its darker aspects: through a detailed historical description of the early American comics he stresses how the humor of mid-20th century comics echoed and justified racial stereotypes and prejudices. Fiona Moore's functionalist social analysis of an international company shows how jokes become tools for negotiating and reaffirming symbolic borders between ethnically different groups. Dolores P. Martinez's study pairs the cognitive level with an emotional one, as her original and straightforward reading of humorous science fiction films illustrates the way in which the movies become a forum not only for dealing with the anxieties that we hold about the future, but also a space for redrawing images of masculinity. Shirley Ardener also presents a gender-focused understanding of humor when describing the English art form of pantomime with its carnivalesque elements and liminoid characteristics, and sees it as a forum for renegotiating sexuality, while laughter is depicted as a response to the comically dissolved anxiety and fear. Glauco Sanga's paper on Italian popular songs with its detailed presentation and analysis of different texts in some sense points to the opposite direction of humor, that is, its ability to socially stigmatize deviances and overstepping of boundaries. Finally, Lidia Dina Sciama's text leads away from popular culture to Goldoni's comedy just to lead back to the question of its popular and local reception, describing how the parodic depiction of locals became a source of laughing at oneself and also a part of a reimagined local identity in the making.

From a theoretical point of view, however, this eclectic character has negative aspects to it as well, most importantly, the fact that it lacks a commonly defined conceptual framework. While individually each of the studies is worth reading and is a valuable contribution to a more nuanced understanding of humor, it remains questionable whether the book becomes more than a collection of studies in an under-defined topic. Of course, it is arguable, and is pointed out both by Sciama's Introduction and by Ardener's paper, that humor is a topic that seems to resist definitions or a rigorous scientific approach. Although one would agree with this statement, it remains debatable whether we should simply accept this as a difficulty and move on, or rather, try to tackle it. The lack of definition holds the danger that our understandings differ not because of the fact that we share different views on the same theme, but because we might be talking about entirely different subjects. While this argument might seem

somewhat trivial, in the case of a volume in which the different topics belong to different times, different cultures, different mediums and different social settings it becomes important to question the ground on which the different phenomena become comparable. In my opinion, the present volume unfortunately lacks this cautiousness. Perhaps a more critical and reflexive editorial or theoretical approach in collecting these texts in a (not only seemingly) coherent volume would explain why this grouping is valid or preferable, without leaving the reader with an impression that one is able to understand their commonalities only instinctively. Of course, it would not be any more appealing if the volume followed a narrow outlook, without adding anything new to such an intriguing social-scientific subject as humor, but it is the coherence of the texts as chapters of a book that becomes questionable. Would it be any different if the papers appeared in an issue of any journal on the topic?

Apart from reflecting on humor through very differing phenomena, the authors also approach the topic through different methodological tools, and more importantly, from different theoretical standpoints. It is definitely a valuable feature of the title that most of its chapters are able to step out of the boundaries of the Bergson-Freud-Bahtyin triangle, from which otherwise many papers cannot step further. Also, even the studies which build on these theories manage to use these creatively, without leaving an impression that they were trying to fit in a set frame. Still, it is quite unfortunate that the anthropological theories on humor, that Sciama in the Introduction is able to review so mindfully and so concisely, are not tackled in the writings of this volume (apart from her and, to a smaller extent Hsu's study). Whereas the Introduction presents the classic theories on humor and sets the tone for a fruitful dialogue on the topic, it seems as though the chapters of the volume do not truly engage in this conversation. One possible theory that the chapters could have engaged with, which could then have become a common denominator, is Mary Douglas' general approach to and theory on humor. In the overview of the papers, I aimed to hint towards the different statements on the function of humor, the comic, or laughter that could be interpreted as questions of affirming, drawing or renegotiating borders. Therefore, it is most unfortunate that the potential that Douglas's understanding of culture (as an amalgam of categories and boundaries) and jokes (as a questioning of rigid structures) might have offered, was not reflected on more in the individual papers. Both the heartening humor Sciama mentions and the ridiculing negative humor – on which (probably due to an idealizing tendency of culturally preferred states of being, such as play in its connection to childhood) there is less said in the present volume – seem to be connected to liminal phases. The statement seems to be true both for the liminality of changes of seasons (e.g. carnivals) and those of life stages (e.g. initiations). Thinking about humor in a Turnerian line of thought, it is not only the liminal, but the liminoid, with its

happenings, performances, the consuming of different arts etc. that seem to be a general flourishing ground for humor. The stress of most studies on renegotiations seem to point to this double fluctuating nature of humor, that is, its liminal or liminoid setting and its impact in the reaffirmation and renegotiation of boundaries. The cognitive boundaries are reflected in the context of performative boundaries, and it is humor that seems to flourish in this setting and reaffirm or rewrite the structures of everyday existence. In my reading of the topic, such a general idea might firstly point out why the majority of the papers of the volume are on different art forms, i.e. comics, movies, pantomime, popular songs and comedies, performed in a liminal, liminoid setting or consumed as a liminoid experience. It might also explain why humor becomes important in such a liminal state of being as doing anthropological fieldwork or early childhood, which are in a sense, both initiation stages into the social man's world. Secondly, such a general argument might point out why most papers underline incongruity, the reaffirmation or remediation of categories as a notable aspect of humor, or why such an existential question as the creation of life, which is hardly touched upon in everyday conversations could be tackled with such contempt in comic context.

All in all, the present volume is a notable contribution to understanding humor and comic performances. It clearly shows that humor is such a nuanced topic that in order to understand it in its complexity, one has to analyze it from a varied range of perspectives, sometimes through the study of seemingly unconnected phenomena. What however I miss, is a more reflexive and well-rounded definition of the concepts touched upon, and a common linking element for the studies. The reading I presented is an attempt to enter in a dialogue with the theories presented in the Introduction: another possible link between the studies, that not only tries to justify their collection in a volume, but hopefully also points toward a more rounded understanding of humor as an analytical concept for social sciences. Perhaps such a reading might contribute to more conversation on the topic.

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