
Johannes N. Schmidt, Felix C. H. Sprang and Roland Weidle (eds.). *Wer lacht, zeigt Zähne: Spielarten des Komischen: Festschrift für Norbert Greiner.* Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014, 292 pp., € 33.50.

Wer lacht, zeigt Zähne: Spielarten des Komischen is a *Festschrift* for Norbert Greiner. In bringing together 27 articles that analyse a huge variety of different literary, cultural and medial sources, this volume also celebrates the width and depth of ‘the comic’ per se. As the editors point out in their introduction, the contributions discuss both the comic as an anthropological entity and comedy as

a literary genre. Hence, the volume combines case studies from Shakespeare to Hitchcock with articles that try to trace the cultural and/or ‘natural’ roots of laughter and the comic, which itself is ‘transgressive’ and therefore undermines strict distinctions between culture and nature. Due to the variety of the different approaches, readers will probably pick out essays that lie within their area of interest. As is often the case with books that assemble articles by so many authors, the quality of the different contributions varies. However, most of the articles are excellent. This may be due to the fact that the contributors, although seldom experts in the field of comedy, are renowned specialists in the fields that they view within the scope of ‘the comic’, ‘comedy’ and ‘laughter’.

After the editors’ concise introduction and outline, *Wer lacht, zeigt Zähne* is divided into four sections that deal with 1) the question of whether laughter is something godly or satanic, as well as with its taboo-breaking potential, 2) academia and the comic, 3) comedy and theatricality and 4) satiric and comic narratives and their structures.

Section 1 starts with Dieter Borchmeyer’s study of the ‘theology of laughter’, which very convincingly argues that laughter is a Christian existential. Borchmeyer first delineates a long tradition of enmity towards laughter in Christianity, before illustrating that there is another, much more biblical tradition, namely that of laughter within Christianity. His article also leads right to the question of what lies at the heart of ‘the comic’. What Borchmeyer calls the ‘first story about laughter’, the anecdote about Thales, who, while looking at the stars, fell into a pond and thus made a maid laugh, shows that the comic is created by the sudden turn of something spiritual into something bodily (cf. 15). According to Borchmeyer such a sudden incongruity, a rupture in the seeming coherence of empiricism, links the holy with the comic. Moreover, Borchmeyer sees ‘humour’ as a godly gift that helps humanity to cope with the puzzle of life (cf. 17). Jochen Hörisch starts off with showing the aggressiveness that can accompany laughter and points to discussions about whether some jokes should be forbidden or not. Subsequently, he is more concerned with the question posed by Borchmeyer whether laughter is something godly or satanic – for Hörisch it is the latter. However, he quotes rather arbitrarily from the bible and his argumentation lacks Borchmeyer’s theologically grounded evidence. Werner Brönnimann and Markus Marti analyse if and how the seven deadly sins can be laughed at. They delineate the comic, often stereotypical presentations of ‘sloth’ and ‘avarice’ in literature, but looking at the other sins they mix fairly random literary and cultural examples. Considering the brevity that every ‘deadly sin’ is dealt with, the analyses might have gained depth and coherence from a concentration on literary examples. Sabine Schülting offers a very interesting interpretation of recent theatre productions of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* within the context of the

reception history of this play and with special focus on the character of Jessica. According to Schülting, these adaptations no longer want to see this play as a tragedy (cf. 47) and in a way resemble early modern productions (cf. 43). The Muslim Jessica of Clemens Bechtel's production in Tübingen (2008) escapes to 'fun society' and the play thus creates a very stereotypical image of Muslim women and, according to Schülting, creates an 'unholy alliance' between 'Western feminism and islamophobia' (47, my translation). Joseph C. Schöpp follows with a very fine analysis of 'black laughter' in antebellum America, which is used as a means of relief and/or subversion and at times even as a weapon. Susanne Rohr argues that comedies about the Holocaust do not laugh about the victims or the crimes, but subvert the rituals of remembering (cf. 66) and thus create new ways of doing so.

Section 2 about academia and the comic opens with Susanne Rupp's article, which shows that the function of humour with respect to alterity changes in the 18th century. As an example she uses Alexander Pope's ironic presentations of himself, which apply an integrative strategy. Instead of being laughed at by others, he laughs about his being a 'little man' himself and thus 'out-does' their wit (cf. 79). Jörg Schönert presents very amusing entries from satirical lexica from the 18th to the 21st century about scholars and their world of learning, while Rüdiger Ahrens contextualises and interprets the modern English campus novel. According to him, the campus novel is also a place where social questions are addressed and he sees humour as the main reason for the genre's success (cf. 97). Dieter Schulz analyses *Walden* as a hoax. According to Schulz, Thoreau uses strategies of the burlesque when dealing with his main topic, economy. For example, he subverts the heroic presentation of the American farmer and through heroic stylisation creates 'bubbles' and then deflates them through satire. In concluding, Schulz shows that the metaphoric concept of 'bubbles' as well as Thoreau's insight into the 'fictitiousness' of the economic system creates a link to the financial crises of the 21st century and to books written about it. Herwig Friedl's article nicely dovetails with Schulz's in presenting the philosophy inherent in Emerson's, but also in Thoreau's writings. He shows that American pragmatism is a 'happy way of thinking', though not a comic one. 'A playfulness of thinking' is also demanded when solving cryptic crosswords and Jörg Hasler focuses on the stylistic, often humorous, at times also literary devices used in cryptic crosswords. Both interesting in their own way, these two articles also show that 'Spielarten des Komischen' are quite broadly understood in this volume. However, as the 'getting of a joke' is something that depends on the social, historical and cultural background, these essays can in a way be seen as contextualising explorations. Hasler's article might have gone a step further in adding an interpretation that includes possible cultural implications.

Section 3 tackles the intriguing relations between comedy and the body/mind and analyses the comic in visual media. Marc Föcking starts with an analysis of the comic body of braggarts in literature and film. He detects trans-generic and trans-historical elements of boasting that combine hyperbolic manliness with deadly force (cf. 129), and his examples reach from the tradition of the *miles gloriosus* to Scaramanga in Ian Fleming's *The Man with the Golden Gun*. In an analysis of laughter in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's Renaissance play *The Changeling*, Andreas Höfele also looks at the anthropological dimension of laughter as a unique characteristic of humans, but also as part of their animalistic nature. Laughter in the play is shown to be both affective and rational. Roland Weidle uses comic theory, namely Henri Bergson's theory about the 'mechanization of the human body', in his analysis of the concomitant comedy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*. Thus Weidle gains new insights and, contrary to prior research, can show that the characters' comedy exists independent of *Hamlet* and that, ironically, the characters' very synchronicity and the fact that they are never on stage without the other are responsible for their autonomous comedy. Whereas Weidle's and Föcking's articles are concerned with comic human bodies, Ute Berns analyses the effects of cats on the stage in her interpretation of Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Berns contextualises her analysis within theories of the comic and the (animal) body on stage and shows the various ways in which cats on the stage create laughter in this black satire about the Troubles. According to Berns 'laughter is on the one hand a bodily, on the other hand a socio- and cultural-historically coded reaction' (189, my translation). The latter is exemplified by the preceding essay, Ewald Mengel's article about Hilde Spiel's translations of Tom Stoppard's plays, in which he shows the difficulties of translating the comic from one language/culture into another. A very broad understanding of comedy is used by Lothar Pikulik, who presents Thomas Mann's theorisations of the theatre as being akin to 'childish play' and further shows that Mann's prose style is very theatrical. In contrast, Helmuth Kiesel's intriguing article presents the precariousness inherent in Dadaist laughter. Laughter is not cheerful here, but a means of deriding almost everything. Section 3 concludes with two articles on the comic in film. In a very interesting analysis, Bettina Friedl interprets the comic metaphoricality of the extravagant, sometimes even grotesque hats worn by the heroines in the screwball comedies of the thirties. Johann N. Schmidt follows with an excellent analysis of Hitchcock's "comedy thriller" *North by Northwest* and its various ambiguities, puns and mistaken identities.

Section 4 opens with Horst-Jürgen Gerigk's theoretical consideration of a definition of the comic. For him seriousness is a precondition for the comic and his article very briefly touches upon the question of inclusive/exclusive humour

as well as on the importance of historical/cultural knowledge for the understanding of jokes. Some points, e.g. his claim that a contemptuous view of mankind is characteristic for humourists, are debatable and Gerigk himself presents examples that prove the contrary. As it quite briefly treats such a grand topic, this essay can serve as a stimulus for further work. Inke Gunia interprets Juan Pablo Forner's satire *Exequias de la lengua castellana*, its narrative structure and the *ars/ingenium* controversy presented, while Wolfgang G. Müller analyses Jane Austen's use of irony with the help of theories of cognition and narratology and shows how readers have to perform a 'cognitive act' in order to understand the irony (cf. 242). According to Peter Hühn, who analyses the narratology of jokes at the very end of the volume, the readers'/audiences' cognitive act is also crucial for the understanding of jokes. Frame discrepancies are created and the readers'/audiences' expectations are misdirected so that they have to decode the joke (cf. 271). Two further insightful articles in this volume analyse different kinds of the comic and of laughter in novels. Felix C. H. Sprang examines the characters' laughter in Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, especially an infectious 'kind of laughter that allows for an emotional proximity and shows humanness at the sight of inhumanity' (252, my translation). Interestingly, readers in *Little Dorrit* are 'invited to laugh *with* the characters, without laughing *about* them' (256, my translation). Ralf Hertel analyses 'postcolonial laughter' in presenting the comic incongruities created in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. In this context, it is very interesting to see that the readers' expectations often do not have to be misled, but are already there as cultural prejudices, which are then comically subverted. The novel's comedy undermines an anglo-centric perspective and, according to Hertel, maybe even the myth of a "Happy Multicultural Land" (Smith, qtd. in Hertel 265).

Although this review might suggest otherwise, all articles, except for Hasler's, are written in German. However, for those who know this language or have now been inspired to learn it, this volume is definitely worth a read. With its admirable scope it can indeed prove how manifold *Spielarten* of the comic are.

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