

Book review

Chiaro, D. & Baccolini, R. (eds.). (2014). *Gender and Humour: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.

The advent and growth of feminist movements and theories during the 20th century, which foregrounded gender as an essential aspect of human identity, called for unprecedented attention to gender itself as well as its relation to other social systems and structures, including language. Ever since, a gradually increasing number of scholars from various disciplines have studied the nexus of gender and humour. The resulting body of research, due to its interdisciplinarity, is necessarily extensive and includes a wide range of topics and research methods. However, the extent of this research is barely comparable to the bulk of gender studies, which normally concern gender in relation to the serious. This remarkable imbalance deserves attention. Two probable reasons come to mind: one is the long-standing and general ambivalence academics have had about humour as a serious scholarly topic (see Davis 1995; Kuipers 2008); the other, at least for feminist studies of humour, is the problematic tradition of feminism and feminists being the object of ridicule by mainstream media (Ferree 2004). Therefore, Chiaro & Baccolini's edited volume is a fortunate and welcome addition to the field.

The book, besides its introduction and the concluding “think tank” chapter, contains 18 essays that concern gender and humour in various cultures and countries including the US, the UK, Japan, Italy, and Hong Kong. Examining visual, verbal, and performative humour in many forms and genres, the essays feature numerous examples of the canned joke, advertising humour, farce, and stand-up comedy, as well as humour found in fiction, film, TV, everyday conversation, and product design. The wide diversity in the genres analysed as well as the absence of essays representative of societies and cultures of the Global South might imply that the book is of use to only a small number of scholars. My own reading of the book, however, proved otherwise. The diversity of themes, genres, and methodologies in the essays, while rendering the general reader an all-inclusive view of the literature, will be particularly helpful to scholars in different fields, as these scholars will encounter theories, methods, applications, and results beyond their own disciplinary boundaries. For instance, scholars in the humanities and social sciences are typically inclined toward theory-informed speculations and empirical research, respectively. For such researchers, the book could provide alternative and complementary scholarly perspectives.

Moreover, while a wider global coverage would certainly have been a merit, even scholars focused on gender and humour in very different cultural contexts will find much to chew on in this volume. This is due not only to the overlap among the (mainly patriarchal) gender orders of numerous societies around the globe — which, I would argue, makes many prevalent theories of gender relevant if not applicable to such societies — but also to the remarkable examples found in some of the essays (e.g., François Bouchetoux's chapter, “Gender trouble in sketches from Japan”, and Jon S. Y. Hui's chapter, “Power and connection: Humour in a Cantonese family”) that approach and recognise the cultural and linguistic specificities of non-

Western humour in spite of the prevalence of many Western theories in humour scholarship in general.

The book is organised in three parts, which are, unfortunately, untitled. In their introduction (p. 3) the editors imply a hardship in assigning titles to the sections; however, some organising headings would have been helpful to the reader. Also, it remains unexplained why, in their synopses for the chapters, the editors follow an order different from that in the table of contents. Despite this inconsistency, there seems to be a logic to the book's organisation. Part I contains seven essays that mostly focus on whole genres, involve broad questions, or raise general claims related to gender and humour. For instance, in the book's opening essay, "Blended space as subversive feminist humour", Janet Bing and Joanne Scheibman draw on linguistics to address problems and gaps in both humour studies and feminist humour studies. Or, in their essays, Jessica Davis, Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, and Frances Gray deal, respectively, with farce, women's speculative fiction, and British film comedy. In "Humourless lesbian", too, Don Kulick puts forward a social explanation for why lesbians are, at least in Western societies, stereotyped as "humourless". Yet he simultaneously advances a broader point about humour itself; as he puts it, "just as culture and social structures produce humour, they also produce humourlessness" (p. 98). The papers in this part are all written based on speculative approaches prevalent in the humanities. By contrast, Part II introduces four papers written by social scientists. Three of these papers feature empirical research: about humour in everyday conversation (Jennifer Coates), humour and femininity in the workplace (Janet Holmes & Stephanie Schnurr), and humour within a Cantonese family (John S. Y. Hui). The other paper, by Rod Martin, renders an informative overview of psychological research on humour and gender. Martin's essay, especially, can be valuable to feminist humour studies as it shows how, as far as men's and women's uses and enjoyment of humour are concerned, belief in any "character dichotomy" (see Connell 2009: 50–53) is barely tenable. The remaining eight chapters, in Part III, offer close readings of various verbal, visual, and performative texts, analysing them through theories from such fields as humour, media, and film studies. The texts discussed in these chapters vary from product designs and gay comedy to *The Catherine Tate Show*, contemporary Italian literature, and Judy Tenuta's stand-up comedy.

Gender and Humour's essays are written by well-established figures in gender and/or humour studies. It contains a comprehensive bibliography that can be particularly helpful to junior scholars interested in the intersection(s) of gender and humour. Unlike some edited volumes, this book is fortunately not merely a heap of thematically related essays. The cross-references embedded in some essays — although I wish there were more of these references — serve to interconnect those essays and to further enhance the book's coherence. The book ends, as mentioned before, with a "think tank" chapter titled "Humour and gender, directions for future research: Where do we go from here?", a virtual forum moderated by the editors to which many of the authors contributed. Among other useful pieces of advice, the contributors emphasise the importance of interdisciplinary research in the study of gender and humour.

In light of the current status of humour studies as well as the essays in this book, I would have also suggested considering more critical perspectives on humour itself. In their essays, most contributors assume humour to be an absolute good as well as an inherently subversive entity. By indicating this, I certainly do not intend to suggest a "misogelast" or anti-laughter approach to humour studies. Rather, I would like to emphasise the approach to humour studies that, as Lockyer & Pickering (2008: 817–818) note, regards humour as a discourse among many other

discourses, which is “not separate or separable from the broad spectrum of communicative forms and processes or from the manifold issues surrounding social encounter and interaction in a multicultural society”. Such a critical perspective can provide us with tools and insights that would be inaccessible if we were to adopt a merely “positive” (see Weaver 2011: 8–9), positivist (Billig 2005), or less critical attitude towards humour. Uncritical or less critical approaches to humour make it difficult, for instance, to question the widespread assumption in humour studies that “all humorous behaviour is inherently subversive” (p. 8). While not all research on gender and humour may be deemed feminist, humour scholars with feminist interests — whose political stance is already linked with contestation and subversion — may welcome the above problematic presumption. However, among other problems, the assumption that humour always subverts makes it difficult to notice norm-reinforcing or disciplinary aspects of humour in relation to gender.

Some of the book’s essays do reveal awareness of this subtlety (e.g. see chapters 13 and 18). Chapter 18 on “queer humour” is particularly insightful as it offers the possibility of certain subversive gender humour that does not end up reinforcing hegemonic gender norms, a possibility that can be helpful to feminist humour scholars in contrast to the unfortunate disciplinary functions of much “feminist humour” (Bing 2004). Such uninvited functions in certain so-called feminist humour problematise the prevalent assumption that humour is inherently subversive. An example from the book under review here will help. Toward the end of her chapter, “Petite flower, Giver Goddess, and Duchess of Discipline: Sexual nonconformity, play, and camp humour in the performance of Judy Tenuta”, Giovanna P. Del Negro adopts a celebratory tone regarding subversive aspects of Tenuta’s humour, contending that Tenuta “prods her audience to think beyond the constraints of fixed social identities and embrace a world that allows for greater sexual and gender non-conformity” (p. 296). As an illustration of Tenuta’s “ridiculing the US obsession with the male libido”, Del Negro refers to one of Tenuta’s jokes: “Ruminating about the possibilities of female Viagra she asks, ‘What would that give us? A wide one?’” (p. 296). Yet, the punchline of the joke itself presumes a hierarchy of female bodies that socially values certain bodies while simultaneously devaluing other bodies (for the related concepts of “hierarchy of bodies” and “body as currency”, albeit with particular attention to men and masculinity, see Gerschick 2005).

All in all, however, *Gender and Humour* brings together a collection of interesting and insightful essays that put forward accessible and thought-provoking discussions on gender and humour as fundamental elements of human identity and life in all societies. Therefore, the book will certainly be of value not only to the interested general reader but also to all scholars with an interest in gender and/or humour studies.

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