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FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

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AURORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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AESTHETIC JOURNEYS AND MEDIA
PILGRIMAGES IN THE CONTEXTS OF POP
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FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

EDITED BY

MARCO PELLITTERI, MAXIME DANESIN, JESSICA
BAUWENS-SUGIMOTO, MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ-PÉREZ,
MARCO BELLANO & JOSÉ ANDRÉS SANTIAGO IGLESIAS

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MUTUAL IMAGES RESEARCH ASSOCIATION – Headquarters
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64600 Anglet – France

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When the World Laughs. Film Comedy East and West **– William V. COSTANZO**

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 360 p.

Review by Jose MONTAÑO | Rikkyō University, Japan

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While film genres have risen or declined along with the times and its trends, according to Aldredge (2019), comedy has remained steady in high popularity through all the years since 1910, which is practically to say throughout the whole history of cinema as an industry. Furthermore, it can be said that comedy stands as the second genre in number of films produced when considering only a single genre tagging. However, as many films might encompass multiple genres, their consideration as “comedies” is often removed in favour of more serious genres reducing the volume of films that might be considered comedies (Bioglio and Pensa, 2018).

This trend to undermine what is humorous, to privilege “seriousness”, can be detected in many other spheres. Snibbe (2020) argues that film prizes are genre biased, and comedies have more difficulty getting recognition at events such as the Academy Awards. The scarce attention given by scholars to the genre is another example, as Yoshida Junji (2006) comprehensively argues with focus on the specific case of Japanese film comedy. The book under review here, *When the World Laughs. Film Comedy East and West*, by William V. Costanzo, comments on some figures about the genre popularity in South America, where “as elsewhere, comedy is the most popular film genre (...) Yet despite its obvious importance to the movie industry and to the culture at large, Latin American comedy has received little serious scholarly attention” (p. 267). Actually, this is not something exclusively circumscribed to cinema, as “for much of human history, tragedy has received more critical attention –and respect– than comedy” (p. 5).

It is under this regard that the publication of this book can be considered excellent news. Not just for the ambitious scope and the amount of valuable information contained in this

volume but precisely for its vocation as a call to fill in the described gap. Usually underrepresented in any kind of publication with an analytical aim, scholarly publications included, the comedy genre is relevant enough for the cinema ecosystem to deserve a wider and deeper analytical approach. This book is a potential trigger of further research efforts on the subject. Hopefully, it will become a landmark book for the discipline of Film Studies.

And yet, the volume's reach is hindered by several aspects one can disagree with and certain inconsistencies in the way the subject is tackled. Hence the need to start with an emphatic, if sincere, praise of a work that this review is far from trying to sharply condemn. The core of my objections to the book are related to my own research interests, oriented around understanding the bias under which Japanese films are often approached in the West. Since, presumably, the author lacks the perspectives that this specialisation might confer, it would not be fair to harshly disapprove his work under this single point of view. And the volume, let me insist, is worth reading and reflecting on its contents for many and varied reasons. As mentioned, the first and foremost of them is the scarcity of comprehensive works on film comedy, especially when it comes to considering comedies outside the Western domain.

The book is structured in two main blocks: an introductory one to set the theoretical frame and an extensive second one devoted to delving on film comedy around the world. In agreement with the times, Costanzo's research is not just contained within the published 335 pages but continues online with a series of chapters discussing particular case study films. There are currently eight of these bonus chapters uploaded by the publisher on its website, with the promise of updating and extending them gradually. The best part is that the film selection is not obvious and revolves around titles a bit out of common knowledge and appreciation such as, for instance, the Malian film *Skirt Power* (Adama Drabo, 1997).

The first block, *Frameworks and Foundations*, starts with a detailed historical journey through the different theories that have shaped our understanding of humour since Aristotle's time. According to the state of the art, Costanzo sets the *incongruity* theory over those of *superiority* or *relief* that were hegemonic in the past. This necessary overview includes insights on the debate around the disruptive, even revolutionary nature of humour versus the opposite stance that defines it as intrinsically conservative. Perhaps the most controversial aspect to tackle at researching and commenting on comedy films.

Let me skip for the moment the next chapter and go to the third, *Archetypes of Comedy*, to examine the universality – highlight this term – of different roles adopted by comic characters such as the clown, the trickster, or the comic duo. This section closes with a mention of recent scholarship on female comedy characters, a still undeveloped topic that is starting to offer new insights to better understand humour.

The next brief chapter, *Comedy, History, and Culture*, recounts the evolution of comedy from its first manifestations in the ancient world to contemporary screen culture. The fifth epigraph, *Technique and Style*, finally closes the first part, focusing on the forms and crafts used in film to convey comicalness.

Three steps behind, chapter 2 describes main forms of cinematic humour, from slapstick to parody, through farce and satire, with a brief incursion on some others like black comedy or the subgenre of romantic comedy. It concludes with another remark worth highlighting: humour is something dynamic, something that might change with the times and its circumstances, fashions, and vogues. This diachronic dimension also manifests in a generational perspective. Teenagers might experience fun differently than their elders; middle-aged people find amusing things that they did not at a younger age, and that they perhaps might find boring some years later. While I – aligned with current scholars – completely agree with this dynamic quality of humour, here is where I would introduce my first objection.

As Matthew Bevis puts it, “whilst comedy takes shape in time, discernable ideas and patterns recur over time” (Bevis, 2013: 3). Following Bevis, in this review I want to plead for “thinking about what might be themed the repertoires of comedy –with comedy conceived as an instinct that can exceed specified boundaries, as a container for expectations and surprises, and as a way of encountering the world” (Bevis, 2013: 3).

If the perception of what is laughable changes diachronically, it is because of different expectations of the audiences (Wells, 2006: 193). Experience of the world is what shapes our understanding and enjoyment of humour, or our lack of it. We can even consider humour as a matter of taste, reducing it to an individual experience. There is, nevertheless, an obvious social dimension to it, and some level of generalisation might be inevitable, but reducing everything to diachronicity as the only factor at play is forgetting that there is no society that is homogenic. One nation might encompass multiple cultural environments and sensitivities. Differences like gender, social status, educational background, and so on,

are as important to shape our understanding of the world as time, so all these dimensions should be included in the equation.

In 1987, the East-West Center in Honolulu, in conjunction with the Hawaii International Film Festival, held a symposium focused on humour and comedy on both sides of the Pacific. The concluding remarks for the symposium were entrusted to Susan Sontag, who lamented that all the contributors made statements merely about the particularities of the countries they were experts on, their culture, history, and other national dilemmas (Sontag, 1987: 100). While not denying interest in humoristic traditions particular to different countries or cultures, Sontag was disappointed by the exclusion from the debate of what is universal in humour (Sontag, 1987: 102).

Overestimation of the national rationale facilitates overlooking the social complexity that any nation carries within, as well as some dimensions of transnationality. There are countries that share the same language and similar cultural dynamics, while regions within the same country might not. Young people from countries with different cultures might have similar hopes and anxieties. The experience of rural life might bring the worldview of a farmer from a different country closer than that of an urban fellow countryman. More than thirty years after Sontag expressed her claims, we are still stuck in the national paradigm and continue to disregard the relevance of this complexity in understanding how humour and comedy are perceived within society. This book, as the organisation of its second section makes evident, is yet another example.

Under the promising title *Local and Global Contexts*, this second part includes eight chapters, devoted to British, French, Italian, and Russian comedies, as well as film comedy in Africa, Scandinavia, South America, and East Asia. This division reveals a purely local approach, since everything is compartmented nationally, in the case of European countries, or regionally for the non-European ones except for Scandinavia, but we will find out that the Scandinavian chapter is subdivided into sections for each of the countries in the region. All this converges to create a sense that differences are the focus. The *global* in the section heading is disregarded and *the World* of the book title laughs, but not unison. Instead of *comedy East and West*, we end up with comedy from the East segregated from that of the West. The imbalance between regional representation in this division might also cause us to wonder if *Film Comedy Europe and the Rest*, or perhaps *North and South*, would have been a more accurate title.

Chapter 1 includes a subsection whose header is *Thinking About Humor in the East*. It starts enumerating the Western thinkers on humour, from Plato to Freud, through Descartes or Kant, who were previously mentioned, to ascertain that theorists within Asian cultures are fewer. The study of their works “suggest some similarities to European views and a few striking differences” (p. 16). And yet, the few differences are privileged over the many commonalities in the body of the text. By setting the Asian domain as Other, the position of the other non-European regions covered by the work remains ambiguous. Why are African traditions not mentioned in this theoretical recount? Is South America considered part of the West?

Chapter 13, *Film Comedy in East Asia*, starts by stressing how distant East Asia is for Western moviegoers, both physically and culturally. The second line refers to the ancient traditions of East Asian countries. Two recurrent elements of the discourse around things Asian, otherness and tradition, justify the perception of how difficult it is to understand their humour. Elaborating on this, it mentions the Japanese term *nazo*, meaning a linguistic pun, to point out wordplay as a common feature that is practically untranslatable and unfathomable for Westerners. So well rooted in the collective imaginary, the slippery soil of exoticising discourse is difficult to overcome – sometimes even for experts trained in analysing non-Western societies and its culture. Using a Japanese term to confer some kind of exclusive category to common things is one of these unconscious strategies. Here this is especially obvious since there is no need to borrow a term. Wordplay is as common and easy to understand as its practice. Those who are ignorant of the language might not be able to decipher and enjoy such jokes, but there are no difficulties in understanding the mechanism behind them. Also, if wordplay is a common trait of humour in many different cultures, why should it be marked as a feature of humour in the East? Furthermore, is it not equally inapprehensible between any language, regardless of how culturally distant are they?

This introduction is continued in the first epigraph, *Laughing in Asia-Traditions of Comedy in China, Japan and Korea*, whose title is eloquent enough: the allusion, once again, to essential ancient traditions along with the recurrence of the national framework. This grouping reveals tension between the potential of having separated chapters for each country against the need to think of them as a block. Actually, after this contextualising section, some subchapters devoted to particular national cases follow.

In any case, this section itemises the implications of the essential belief systems such as Dao, Buddhism, Zen, or Shinto on the conformation of the different forms of comedy we can find in East Asian cinemas. The conclusive paragraph, referring to the Japanese case, states that “all these early forms of humour contributed in one way or another to the genre of Japanese film comedy known as *kigeki*. *Kigeki* spans a broad spectrum of slapstick, burlesque, parody, irony, black comedy, comedy of pathos, and comedy of manners.” (p. 303) Again, a term that might simply be substituted by its equivalent, *comedy*, to describe it as wide and comprehensive that practically includes everything this volume has previously theorised about. These facts are telling us that there are no essential differences. Why, then, the insistence and the effort to establish those differences? Have we learnt anything specific to Asian comedies in the end? Would it not have been more productive to get rid of the national mindframe and just talk about films, subgenres, themes, aesthetics, and other related topics, regardless of their culture of origin?

The chapter devoted to South American comedy films starts to regret that extension constraints force it to “sidestep the important contributions to Latin American film comedy of Mexico and Cuba, for example, along with the rest of Mesoamerica and the Caribbean” (p. 268). These space limitations might also have determined the choice of one of the two main linguistic domains in the subcontinent, Spanish or Portuguese. The decision to maintain both remains unexplained. All things considered, the statement conveys a clear sense of differentiation from Anglo-Saxon North America.

In the case of Africa, the author declares its precautions to avoid “perpetuating Western stereotypes, lumping all Africa together as if there were no differences in language, culture, history, ethnicity, or religion.” (p. 211). It would have been advisable, then, that the chapter title includes the specification that it is about sub-Saharan Africa, excluding the wide northern part of the continent. Even labelling it central Africa or intertropical Africa might have been fair since South African movies are also excluded. However, the justification of the regional framework, at least from my viewpoint as a non-expert in African cultures, is convincing. Film histories in the region have been researched from the linguistic paradigm, not the national, so national boundaries have blurred in favour of filiations inside the Lusophone, Anglophone, or French-speaking spheres. Common challenges such as the legacy of colonialism or the slow development of film industries’ assets such as theatres and distribution chains, might explain parallel developments throughout the different cultural domains in the area.

I wonder how an expert on Africa and its cinemas might react to that baseline. Nevertheless, the result is a chapter that does not rely on the limitations of the national framework. And this is not due to the exoticism of the films described, but because of a thought-provoking tracing of a genuinely transnational spread of styles, genres, and influences. Also, the South American chapter is infused with a similar taste, as it relies more upon tropes and thematic reasoning than on national particularities. For these reasons, both chapters are, by far, the most interesting of the book, showing its potential and somehow revealing what it might have been.

In conclusion, the search for boundaries and local specificities, with the false sense of homogeneity conveyed by the national framework, and the unconscious need to disconnect exotic cinemas from the Western ones, has prevented a truly global approach to the topic of film comedy. And yet, I will insist one last time, I consider the book, even despite all my many disagreements – or perhaps precisely because of them –, an opportunity to invigorate a much-needed intellectual debate around comedy films. It is a book that should be read, its contents spread, criticised, revised, upgraded. New perspectives might be born from and built upon it. It is a valuable volume and perhaps a first step, potentially a leap, to further studies that significantly improve our understanding and appreciation of film comedy.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jose MONTAÑO holds a PhD in Humanities from Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona), obtained with a dissertation on contemporary Japanese cinema and its reception by Spanish film criticism. Previously, he completed an MA in Contemporary Cinema and Audio-visual Culture in the same institution, as well as an MA in East Asian Societies and Cultures at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Barcelona). Currently, he is a part-time lecturer at different institutions as Rikkyō University, Toyo-Gakuen University, Kanda University of International Studies and IES-Abroad Tokyo. His research interests are film criticism, contemporary Japanese cinema and Japanese film comedy. orcid <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5930-5704>