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## Hannu Salmi (ed.), *Historical Comedy on Screen: Subverting History with Humour*

Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2011. 232 p. ISBN 9781841503677

Jure Gantar

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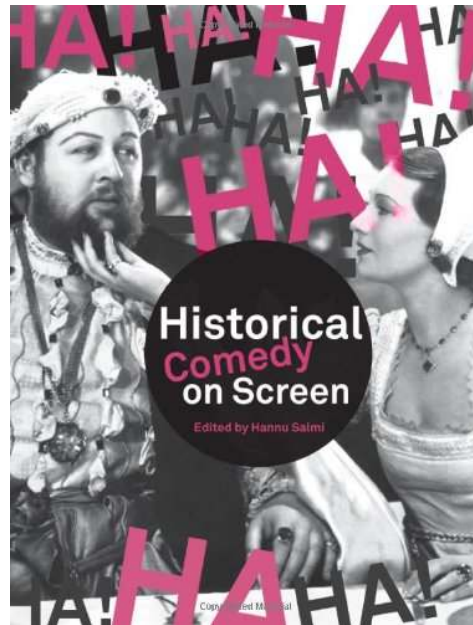
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## REFERENCES

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1 *Historical Comedy on Screen: Subverting History with Humour* is a collection of eight loosely connected papers on film comedies set in the historical past. The book quite deliberately focuses on what scholarship has traditionally considered popular or low culture and, at the same time, emphasizes the anti-establishment streak that even the mainstream historical comedies possess. Despite the inevitably commercial goals to which the relentless pursuit of laughter leads successful historical comedies, this screen genre also plays a crucial demystifying role in a society's approach to history. By destabilizing the mythologies of conventional grand narratives, especially those in the service of national identities, historical comedies alert their viewership to the potential dangers of the unchecked adulation of the past. "Makers of comedies take often an ironically critical attitude to the smooth image of the past offered by historical studies and fiction" (26), writes Hannu Salmi, the editor of the collection, and later concludes that the main function of historical comedy is to give "us an opportunity to perceive the past as something more than a predetermined and prefabricated entity" (29).



2 The book is divided into two sections: the first one deals with the use of comic techniques in historical comedies, while the second focuses on the ideological implications of a comic treatment of various periods of history. Of the chapters in the first group, Susan E. Linville's analysis of Buster Keaton's Southern comedies and David Ludwigsson's account of *Kalabalik*, a well-known Swedish 1983 comedy, are both theoretically more sophisticated and more original in terms of their ideas than either Harri Kilpi's brief assessment of British post-World-War-Two film comedies or Maurice Yacowar's take on Woody Allen. Ludwigsson's contribution, in particular, is perhaps the highlight of the entire study. While his starting point – that historical film comedies are an essentially transgressive genre and that they typically rely in their narrative on "historical myth" (55) rather than facts – is not especially innovative, his taxonomy of comic techniques is thorough, uninhibited by prior methodological models, organic to his purposes, and a result of a logical investigation. This enables him to arrive at several intriguing observations even without the help of other works of comic theory. He notes, for instance, that "in comedy normal causal chains are broken and coincidence may play an important role" (56) because the audience recognizes certain narrative norms. He also comments on a "childish lack of body control" (62) as an important comic element, yet, somewhat surprisingly, never mentions either Mikhail Bakhtin or Sigmund Freud. Despite this, Ludwigsson's closing suggestion that in comedies "spectacle is privileged over narrative" (72) opens a variety of possibilities for a future inquiry.

- 3 Linville, conversely, does resort to Freud in her interpretation of *Our Hospitality* and *The General*. She contends that the main reason for Keaton's success with juxtaposing "a remembered rural South and modernity" (35) lies in the inherent duality of the categories of "uncanny/unhomey" (38) and further asserts that Keaton's "historical comedies render history uncanny" (37). In general, hers is a Freudian reading, but without looking at psychoanalytical theories of comedy themselves. While Linville is occasionally prone to lapsing into jargon (the Union train is castrated before it penetrates [47]), her adoption "from the Horatio Alger stories which were popular in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (51) of the rhyming terms "pluck" and "luck" – she describes the comic hero's genetic make-up as the "blend of uncommon pluck and dumb luck" (45) – captures the essence of Keaton's clowning perfectly.
- 4 The second part of the book begins with a chapter by David Archibald on cinematic comedies based on the Spanish Civil War. Unlike Terry Eagleton who, following Theodor W. Adorno's famous proclamation, argues that some traumatic historical events such as Auschwitz cannot, or should not, be made funny, Archibald counters that even a highly contentious and historically divisive episode such as the Spanish Civil War will eventually start to exhibit a humorous side, though this only happens from a sufficient historical distance. "Comic elements, at least at significant levels," he writes, "began to appear in cinematic representations of the civil war in 1985, ten years after the death of the dictator and almost 50 years after the end of the civil war" (126).
- 5 A similar topic is also addressed in Hagai Dagan's chapter on "Holocaust-Nostalgia" (153), except that the focus here is on the semantic parallels between irony, sarcasm, and nostalgia. What all three phenomena have in common is that they foreground "the gap between the literal, explicit meaning and the implicit, non-literal one" (155). The main difference between the two is in that in the case of irony the "person performing it is probably aware at least of some of [its] complexity," while "[n]ostalgia, on the other hand, has an image linked to innocence and it can indeed be carried out in a rather innocent way" (155). The majority of Dagan's account focuses on Moshe Zimmerman's documentary *Pizza in Auschwitz* which, according to the author of the chapter, manages to bridge this divide and bring nostalgia and irony together. In this film, Dagan writes, "irony usually seems to contradict the nostalgic gaze, because it disrupts the sentimental harmony and smoothness it seeks" (163), and in this way simultaneously protects its purveyor from the "trauma" of his memories and "enables the preservation of nostalgia" (168).
- 6 Though the authors of the study come from a number of countries (Finland, Sweden, USA, UK, Canada, and Israel), most of the chapters focus on British and American film and television comedy which necessarily restricts the epistemological scope of the book as a whole. Rami Mähkä's investigation of the treatment of World War Two in British comedy, for instance, also deals with nostalgia, but rarely reaches beyond a historical summary. Marcia Landy's promisingly entitled "Comedy and Counter-History" begins with a repetition of the relatively well known hypothesis according to which the main role of comedy "as counter-history [is] to undermine official narratives of the past" (177) but, because her analysis is limited to four examples only, ends up adding little new insight to this otherwise interesting idea. In general, it sometimes seems as if Monty Python, with its treatment of medieval and ancient histories in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *The Life of Brian*, has such a disproportional influence on the

theoretical framework of the book that it almost functions as a rigid epistemological paradigm. As imaginative as their parodies of historical mythologies have been, the Pythons' ironic perspective on comic history has come to monopolize and dominate the critical landscape to the point of stifling any dissenting views.

- 7 In fact, the affection for Monty Python is probably the single methodological element that the authors of the book have in common. Though some of them do invoke the classics of postmodern scholarship, from Bakhtin to Michel Foucault, the chapters remain methodologically heterogeneous. Their awareness of the theory of humour and comedy is often limited, sometimes to the degree that they reinvent terminology that could have been picked from the shelves of the theoretical ready-to-wears. Linville, for example, in her psychoanalytical account does not mention either Theodor Lipps or Charles Mauron, and does not even make a reference to one of Freud's own works on jokes and humour. Notwithstanding Salmi's valiant effort to bring the chapters together in his "Introduction," the book still gives the impression of being an assortment of stand-alone papers rather than a coherent whole. The editor is right when he posits that historical film comedy has been undertheorized, but his book does little to rectify this oversight.

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