

History and Humour – 1800 to Present

Veranstalter: DFG Research Group 875 – „Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen der Gegenwart“

Datum, Ort: 05.07.2012–07.07.2012, Freiburg / Breisgau

Bericht von: Sabrina Feickert, Seminar für Alte Geschichte, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg; Nina Reusch, DFG-Forschergruppe „Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen der Gegenwart“, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

Humour is a common trait of human beings throughout all cultures and periods, albeit varying in its reception and social function. In its capacity to reflect reality, humour offers a rich source for historical studies, yet academic research has hitherto neglected the topic. The conference at Freiburg succeeded in filling this gap and took a detailed look at the various functions and manifestations of both humour in the past and humorous representations of the past. The papers considered the role of humour in diverse media and genres, in different nations and over a wide range of time.

In times of war, humour and satire were often essential in boosting a nation's morale. Anecdotes and caricatures served as means to ridicule and demonize the enemy and to rally the people's support for its army and political leaders. In her keynote, LESLEY MILNE (Nottingham) compared the humorous dealings with World War I in texts of the British *Punch* magazine, the French *Le Rire* and the German *Simplicissimus*, exploring the function of jokes in times of war and the hints humorous propaganda offers about contemporary mentalities. Milne showed that the magazines used the art of „flyting“ to mock and provoke enemy nations and to lift the moral of their own troops. Soon, they engaged in a veritable „speech war“, mirroring the one their armies fought on the battlefield. Using the example of the Russian Patriotic War against Napoleon, ELISABETH CHEAURÉ (Freiburg/Breisgau) demonstrated the importance of caricatures as a medium easily accessible even for the illiterate parts of the population. Cheauré examined how „lubki“,

popular xylographs showing caricatures of Napoleon in pictures and text, were not only used in the war of 1812 itself, but were later referred to again to reactivate the figure of Napoleon during the First and Second World War. Comparing Wilhelm II, Franz Joseph I or Adolf Hitler with Napoleon implied that these rulers' attempts at conquering Russia would fail as thoroughly as Napoleon's endeavours had.

Images appeal to subconscious and emotional levels, they can even normalize illogical and contradictive statements, as EBERHARD DEMM (Koszalin) illustrated with the example of World War I caricatures in journals and newspapers. Targeting common fears and objects of hatred, downplaying the enemy's morale and capacities, and exaggerating their casualties while glorifying one's own strength, the caricatures were an integral part of both the German and Allied war propaganda.

Frequently, comedy and humour were employed as a means of coming to terms with traumatic episodes of the past. Questioning the dynamics of the surrealists' passion for graphic depictions of violence and destruction when violence entered European politics in the 1930s and became a daily reality, BENJAMIN KOHLMANN (Freiburg/Breisgau) analyzed André Breton's anthology of black humour.¹ With the example of poems by Louis Aragon and their controversial reception, Kohlmann showed how the surrealists used black humour as a literary strategy to deal with the real terrors of the world. In his paper on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, IRVIN HUNT (New York) argued for a re-reading of the novel based on Kenneth Burke's „comic frame“ theory.² Hunt perceived three elements as being central to Ellison's rewriting of a traumatic period of black history in a comic form: the failure of historiography as a detached category, the automation of the characters and the discrepancy between losing grasp of social conventions while subconsciously obeying them at the same time.

Humour as a guise for confrontations with

¹ André Breton, *L'Anthologie de l'Humour Noir*, Paris 1940.

² Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, New York 1952.

an alterity, be it a foreign nation or an obscure historical period, was a recurring topic. MARTIN CONBOY (Sheffield) highlighted how humour and popular culture can form an unholy alliance when „only having a laugh“ turns into „the oldest excuse for behaving badly“, framing chauvinistic and core nationalist claims in jokes and puns. Tracking populist stereotypes and war vocabulary in the coverage of the European football championships in the British tabloids *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror*, Conboy exposed the deflationary potential humour acquires when irony is turned into a reference system for backward social and political tendencies.

The uneasy negotiation of Anglo-American identities in the face of the former British colony's growing economic and cultural vitality relied heavily on humorous depictions in Victorian magazines and newspapers, as BOB NICHOLSON (Manchester) established. The „possession of the past“ was staged as a comic conquest of history when „A Connecticut Yankee“ took over Camelot and American cleaning products failed to erase a ghostly bloodstain in an English castle.³ Humour could also have conciliatory effects, however: adaptations of American jokes in British newspapers reflected an honest esteem for the „benefits and freshness of American popular culture“.

KATHARINA BOEHM (Regensburg) undertook a re-appreciation of the British societies of antiquaries, who have long been the object of ridicule and pejorative associations. Witticisms and sexual innuendo played an important role in the libertine Dilettanti culture, both in marketing strategies of antiquarian treatises and in the antiquarian discourse itself. Focusing on Sir William Hamilton's research on the remnants of the ancient cult of the *Priapeia* in Italy, Boehm also showed how the female body was staged as an artifact and an objectified surrogate for antiquity.

Many presentations showed newspapers to be a medium which regularly employed humour as a means of expressing social and political criticism in systems characterized by a strict control of the press and state censorship. LOUISA REICHSTETTER'S (Jena) comparative study on German, French and Spanish newspapers in the interwar period

focused on the impact of censorship on the satiric left-wing press. Taking into account the balance between caricatures and written texts, Reichstetter established a considerable shift from explicit, anti-right-wing caricatures to cartoons depicting matters of everyday life, while satiric criticism was transferred into the texts.

MOSHE MAGGID (Jerusalem) discussed the relationship between politics, social issues and humour in the Ladino newspapers of Ottoman Turkey. Firmly rooted in enlightened Jewish circles, their auto-ironic tendencies provoked fierce criticism and demands for censorship among orthodox Jews. In sections entirely dedicated to witty and often cynical anecdotes, jokes and caricatures, the newspapers addressed Jewish living conditions, political and religious practices and the modernization of the Empire during the government of the Young Turks.

While subversive power was generally accepted one of the main functions of humour, several papers convincingly questioned the concept of humour as a strategy of political resistance. MARTINA KESSEL (Bielefeld) looked at the role of humour in policies of exclusion, focusing on the example of jokes in the times of German National Socialism. Amongst other examples, she showed how the debate about „right“ and „wrong“ laughter excluded Jews from society by accusing them of mocking non-Jewish Germans. Kessel pointed out that joking „is a privilege of people who can afford to complain“ and „a communicative contract“ between rulers and subjects, as laughing and jesting prevent from questioning sensitive issues too closely. JONATHAN WATERLOW (Oxford) challenged the interpretation of humour as an oppositional weapon. In his paper on Stalinist Russia, he emphasized the role of humour as a coping mechanism, with jokes functioning both as interpersonal trust tokens and a language outside state discourse. According to Waterlow, a crosshatching effect took place when on the level of humorous language the official and unofficial did not clash but inter-

³ Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, New York / London 1889; Oscar Wilde, „The Canterville Ghost“, in: *The Court and Society Review* (1887).

acted. Thus, instead of becoming a means of political resistance, humour promoted adaptation, not opposition.

Several papers were devoted to analyzing how humour featured in the depiction of public personae. ULRIKE ZIMMERMANN (Freiburg/Breisgau) introduced the Duke of Wellington as a character frequently adopted in comic representations, due to his boisterous nature, his taste for repartee and his political conservatism. Pointing out the „uneasy mixture“ of military and political aspects in Wellington’s career and his inevitable omnipresence in British public life, she emphasized the subversive power of humour and the need to come to terms with the conceptual shifts of the youthful hero turning into a withered old man, taking up a liminal position at the beginning of the Victorian Age. DOROTHEA FLOTHOW (Salzburg) explored how 19th and 20th century British comedies staged the image of the „Merrie Monarch“ Charles II as an array of stock anecdotes from the king’s private life. Foregoing political issues and emphasizing the monarch’s sexual ventures, the comedies portrayed Charles as the embodiment of an opulent past. As Flothow emphasized, it was the focus on a stereotypical comic depiction of the Stewart king as a private figure that had long excluded the historical comedies from the academic canon, neglecting their value for social history. Examining the role of humour in power politics, KATERINA VARELA (Athens) analyzed political cartoons in Greek newspapers. Varela exemplified the unstable political situation of Greece in the 1960s through her analysis of the propaganda cartoons of George Papandreou’s Central Union Party. She showed how Papandreou not only used political cartoons as propaganda, but also to defend freedom of speech and satire as an important element of democracy.

AXEL HEIMSOOTH (Essen) emphasized the damaging effect of satirical humor in his outline of the deconstruction of an „industrial legend“ through subversive satirical caricatures targeting Friedrich Alfred Krupp. While Alfred Krupp had been celebrated as the „Cannon King“ since the Paris World Exhibition in 1867, his son caught the full force of criticism and hostility. Caricatures portrayed

him as a ruthless capitalist, profiteer and war-monger, exploiting the workers at his factories and selling arms to enemy governments while enjoying a life of conspicuous luxury.

Due to the role caricatures played in shaping public opinion, popular cartoonists also gained a considerable influence. SANDRA SCHWAB (Mainz) showed how the lifework of Richard Doyle, one of the most famous Victorian illustrators known for his cover design for *Punch*, turned medieval history into merciless parody. His detailed illustrations of ludicrously un-heroic knights or cute heraldic animals deconstructed the fanciful contemporary ideas about the Middle Ages and chivalric masculinity by caricaturing them. ALLISON STAGG (New York) presented the caricatures of James Akin as biting commentaries of American politics. In the case of Akin’s notorious caricatures of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, satiric humour proved to be both a source for his fame as an artist and a severe impediment for his career. Despite such setbacks, Akin’s illustrations established a new genre of political satire in America, turning caricatures into a regular and influential component of US newspapers and magazines.

Humorous depictions of history have also become an important subject of popular culture and new media. SHANNON GRANVILLE (Washington) examined the Japanese manga series *Hetalia: Axis Powers* and its specific approach to history and nationalism. *Hetalia* constructs „history with a human face“, equipping the different nations involved in World War II with human characters. Their interactions and relations are translated into interactions between individuals, which allows for a representation of the war in an entertaining way, yet at the same time manifests national stereotypes and avoids coping with the serious issues of war. Confronting war and its influence on everyday life was also a central topic in SABRINA FEICKERT’S (Freiburg/Breisgau) paper. Feickert analyzed parodies of Zack Snyder’s movie *300*⁴ about the Battle at Thermopylae. She showed that while *300* glorifies Spartan masculinity and defiance of death, the parodies ridicule the theme of existential struggle.

⁴ Zack Snyder (Regie), *300*, 2007.

Both ways of approaching the Spartan realm attempt to come to terms with its Otherness and concepts of archaic masculinity, violence and madness staged as opposites of individualism and enlightened rationality. DUNCAN MARKS (Sheffield) traced the afterlife of Queen Victoria's famous saying „We are not amused“ in print media, stage plays and films of the 20th century. Looking at these different media and different times, Marks showed that in popular usage the famous sentence was detached from its historical context. It does not refer to historical realities but signifies self-referential and ironic dealings with British identity or, in a non-British environment, often denotes „Britishness“ as a notion of „coolness“ and sophistication.

The conference offered a broad overview of current research on the forms and functions of humour in history and historiography. The papers highlighted how humorous depictions of the past have a crucial function for the negotiation or reinforcement of identities and power relations, but also as a coping mechanism in times of war and emotional or political crisis. The interdependence of humorous content and the respective media or genres proved an interesting aspect, as well. The conference has shown humour to be a fundamental part of presenting and negotiating history, which demands further academic attention.

Conference Overview

Introduction

Barbara Korte (Freiburg/Breisgau), Bernd Körtmann (Freiburg/Breisgau)

Keynotes

Lesley Milne (Nottingham): Letting Loose the Doggerel of War: Humorous and Satirical Journals in Britain, France and Germany 1914-1918:

Martin Conboy (Sheffield): Geoff Hurst's Ball: Popular Tabloids and Humour on the Dark Side

1st Panel

Katharina Boehm (Regensburg): Antiquarian Laughter: Satire, Sex and Homosociability in Late-Eighteenth Century Dilettanti Culture

Ulrike Zimmermann (Freiburg/Breisgau): On Boots, Beef and *Blackadder*: The Comic Historiography of the Duke of Wellington

2nd Panel

Bob Nicholson (Manchester): The Laughter of Good Fellowship? Negotiating the Past, Present and Future in Anglo-American Humour, 1870-1900

Dorothea Flothow (Salzburg): Merrying the Monarch: Charles II in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Historical Comedies

Allison Stagg (New York): Presidential Humor: The Political Caricature of James Akin

3rd Panel

Sandra Schwab (Mainz): Richard Doyle's Historical Caricatures

Katerina Varela (Athens): George Papandreou – A Leader Through the Cartoons (1960-1967)

4th Panel

Axel Heimsoth (Essen): Alfred and Friedrich Alfred Krupp as Butt of Jokes? The German Perception of the Economic Elite in the 19th century

Moshe Maggid (Jerusalem): The Humorous Ladino Newspapers in Ottoman Turkey

Eberhard Demm (Koszalin): Propaganda through Humour: Cartoons in World War I

5th Panel

Jonathan Waterlow (Oxford):

Mirth, Myth and Martyrs: The Loaded Histories of Popular Humour in Stalin's 1930s

Martina Kessel (Bielefeld): 'Victims' and 'Perpetrators': Constructing History and Society in Nazi Humour

Louisa Reichstetter (Jena): Between Journalism, Arts and Politics: Leftwing and Liberal Satiric Press and Their Protagonists in the Interwar Period. A Comparative Study of Germany, France and Spain

6th Panel

Elisabeth Cheauré (Freiburg/Breisgau): Napoleon and the 'Patriotic War of 1812' in Russian Humour

Benjamin Kohlmann (Freiburg/Breisgau):
'Brittle Ghosts': Surrealism, History, and
Black Humour in the 1930s

Irvin Hunt (New York): From Bergson to
Burke: Comic Historiography in Ralph Elli-
son's *The Invisible Man*

7th Panel

Shannon Granville (Washington): History
with a Human Face: Humour and Historical
Representation in *Hetalia: Axis Powers*

Sabrina Feickert (Freiburg/Breisgau): 'Then
We Will Fight in the Shade': Comic Represen-
tations of Sparta and Coming to Terms with
Fearsome Otherness

Duncan Marks (Sheffield): We ARE Amused;
the Afterlife of Queen Victoria's Alleged Re-
mark, 'We are not amused'

Round-up

Doris Lechner (Freiburg/Breisgau)

Tagungsbericht *History and Humour – 1800
to Present*. 05.07.2012–07.07.2012, Freiburg /
Breisgau, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 15.09.2012.