

**REVIEW OF *THE LANGUAGES OF HUMOR: VERBAL, VISUAL, AND PHYSICAL HUMOR*, EDITED BY ARIE SOVER. BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, 2018. PP. VII+320**

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Arie Sover has edited a remarkable anthology, which he dedicated to Christie Davis (1941-2017), the great British sociologist who devoted his career to humor and more specially to jokes.

The anthology is unique, as Sover notes, because it brings together three “languages” of humor in order to facilitate a critical dialogue amongst them and better encircle what may be at their common origin. Sover hopes that this collection will clarify each language and will encourage students and professionals alike to use the tool-box it provides for approaching the three languages. More than 20 illustrations aim to make this book even more serviceable for scholars of various disciplines, and the authors who contributed to it constitute a truly international group. All this makes for an impressive contribution to humor studies.

An additional asset of this anthology is that bridges the gaps between the various forms or “languages” of humor, which in humor studies are usually treated separately. “Languages” here refer to expressions of humor through verbal, visual, or physical humor. These are approached mainly through study of jokes, caricatures and slapstick, respectively. To that purpose, 17 essays have been chosen out of 41, authored by scholars who come not only from different nationalities but also from various disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, communication, philosophy, history, social sciences, linguistics, computer science, literature, theater, education and cultural studies. The anthology is divided into three parts, each holding between 5 and 7 essays; Davis’s essay, which opens the collection, is published posthumously.

Because Sover narrowed verbal, visual and physical humor to jokes, caricatures cartoon, and slapstick, respectively, a broader picture is obtained for each despite the necessary specificity of many of the essays. In addition, two essays contribute to this broader picture of humor: referred to as hybrid, they clarify the relationship between humorous writing and humorous drawing. The outcome of the anthology is enlightening as it enables a deeper reflection on humor, once we recognize the commonalities between the three languages or forms of humor. Sover lists in the introduction some of the traits these forms

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have in common (pp. 9-11) and notes on the back cover their common purpose, which is to show “in different ways the reality that we live in, and how we can reflect on that reality.”

More specifically, whether expressed in oral and written form, in graphic drawings, or in body language, the languages of humor are culture-based and can pride themselves on rich histories, which Sover relates in the introduction. Sover notes how the various essays which comprise this anthology reflect the similar function the three languages of humor share, which is to meet our needs. They fulfill this function by providing a defense mechanism for difficulties and traumas, by voicing social and political criticism, by expressing common social values, by improving our cognitive and creative capacities as well as by releasing tension, ameliorating physical and mental health and providing pleasure. Sover clarifies these functions through examples drawn from the various essays that comprise the varied topics this anthology addresses.

Sover’s comparison of the three humor languages also addresses the ways in which they differ. First, the sustained study of jokes has led humor scholars to a better understanding of verbal humor, in contradistinction to caricatures, for example. However, second, in contradistinction to jokes and slapstick, caricature aims, and sometimes succeeds at bringing about an actual change in the world. Third, slapstick is a part of life before becoming an art, which may not be the case for jokes and caricatures. Finally, Sover points to a “comic transference” that takes place amongst the various forms of humor, by which he means that the strategies of one form are transferred to another.

The anthology has three parts, each devoted to one of humor languages. Part One addresses canned jokes. Although humor scholars are familiar with the subject, some of the interest of this part lie in two essays that address jokes in general. They include Davis’s posthumously published contribution on jokes and insults, language and aggression, and Asa Berger’s contribution, his interesting attempt of explaining how various disciplines approach jokes and his own theory of how jokes work. The remaining essays that comprise this part narrow down the approach to jokes to specific topics (political jokes, situational comedies), places (Malta, Soviet Union) and ethnicity (Jewish jokes). Jewish jokes are exemplified this time by Joseph Dorinson’s comprehensive study of Jewish humor through study of jokes on God, livelihood (Parnusseh) and troubles (Tsores). The specific topics addressed are a study on intertextuality and cultural literacy in contemporary political jokes (Villy Tsakona) and a comparative study on holocaust sitcom jokes in America and Israel (Jeffrey Scott Demsky and Liat Steir-Livny). The study of Mary Ann Cassar tackles the Maltese Gahan as an example of humor and

liminality while Nataliia Kravchenko and Tetiana Pasternak address the pragmatics of Russian post-Soviet jokes.

Part Two attempts to understand caricatures and cartoons, by focusing either on drawing or on both drawing and writing. The latter comprise Carla Canestrari's study of the interplay between visual and verbal language in "Famous Last Words" cartoons, the combined work of three persons, an Israeli scholar, Dafna Shahaf, Bob Mankoff, the former Cartoon Editor of The New Yorker Magazine and at present the Cartoon and Humor Editor of the Esquire Magazine, and Eric Horvitz, a Technical Fellow and Managing Director at Microsoft Research in the US, which aim at identifying humorous cartoon captions algorithmically. The essays that concentrate on drawing only include a study of Early Soviet graphic satire, which exemplifies how caricature may serve as a weapon in class struggle (Annie Gérin), a study of the internet political Meme, which remedies the political cartoon (Khin-Wee Chen), and of the French Charlie Hebdo case, which exemplifies the desacralization of the image that caricature enables.

Part Three, which comprises essays on slapstick and physical comedy, is highly original in the diversity of the art-forms it brings together. Paul Bouissac opens by asking, "Under What Conditions Can Body Movements be Humorous?" He argues that slapstick is part of our daily lives long before it becomes part of art. Sover's contribution enlightens the path that leads from Circus clowns to the first American slapstick cinema comedians. Evangeline E. Nwokah, Vanessa Lopez and Erin Morrison follow with slapstick humor in children's popular literature, Terri Toles Patkin explores how classical music is re-appropriated through slapstick, and Vicky Manteli tackles the topic of slapstick in drama, more specifically in staging Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. In that part, I miss reference to the seminal work of the great aesthete and film expert, Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007).

In the Introduction, Sover sums up the findings each study brings to the specific language of humor it addresses; he also draws conclusions for humor studies out of the recurring themes found in the separate languages of humor. The anthology points to the need of synthesizing the findings not only of the various disciplines that study humor, as the International Society for Humor Studies does, but of looking at the variety of art forms or languages that humor takes as variations on single themes, much as Henri Bergson has intimated in his book, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911). While Sover does not aim to reduce the comical to one mechanism, he aims to help unify our research

while respecting the disciplinarity contemporary professionalism imposes on us. For this reason, as well as for the high quality of the essays chosen, I warmly recommend this anthology to all those who seek to enrich their knowledge of humor in general, as well as of its various forms, either verbal, visual or physical.