

Book review

Roemer, M. (2012). *Shocked but Connected: Notes on Laughter*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 288pp.

Why do jokes, comedies, and professional comedians make us laugh? This seemingly straightforward question frames the basis of the latest book by filmmaker and academic Michael Roemer. In addressing this question, Roemer unveils the complexities involved in understanding and appreciating the comedy process, from comedy's production and content through to its reception. The nature of comedy and laughter is primarily examined through discussion of why film comedy makes us laugh. However, this is a broad-ranging book as film comedy is compared to comedy in art, music, dance, literature, stand-up comedy and clowning, and jokes told in everyday conversations.

The book is written in a conversational style and is comprised of 10 chapters: "Surprised"; "Freud"; "Different and scary"; "Disconnected"; "Bergson and high comedy"; "Blind and helpless but alive"; "Childhood"; "Making it real"; "*Annie Hall*"; and "Connected but free". Throughout the book Roemer interweaves theories of comedy by key thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud with both personal anecdotes and a diverse range of examples from stage and screen including Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Woody Allen, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *Pulp Fiction* and *The Devil Wears Prada*. Drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives is important for Roemer given that he notes from the outset that "we laugh for so many reasons that any attempt to corral them into a unified theory is doomed" (p. ix). In the first chapter, "Surprise", Roemer argues that the role of surprise in generating laughter is intricately related to a number of complex, and sometimes interconnected, features. These include (hidden) truth, tension, immediacy, physical effect, relief, pleasure, incongruity, discontinuities, defamiliarising the blueprint, puzzles, riddles, misperceptions and misunderstandings.

Although most prominent in the "Disconnected" and the "Connected but free" chapters, a theme running throughout the book is the way in which in our everyday lives we are simultaneously connected and disconnected from ourselves, other people, objects and situations. In the "Disconnected" chapter Roemer examines how connection and disconnection operates in the comedy process by examining the connections comedians and audiences make between words used in jokes, the way in which the disconnection between the comic's reality and the audiences' reality generates laughter and the connection we experience with other people when we are amused by the same jokes (the latter of which is examined further in the "Bergson and high comedy" chapter which focusses on the social aspect of comedy via an interesting critique of Henri Bergson's (1999[1911]) theory of laughter). Further, Roemer explains how the passage of time distances us and reveals how this impacts on comedy appreciation: "Corpses look too much *like* us to be funny, but skeletons can make

us laugh, especially if – instead of lying prone and lifeless – they are upright and moving” (p. 89; emphasis in original); and he refers to the importance of being emotionally disconnected to the joker and the joke: “Tendentious jokes and most comic situations make us potentially uncomfortable. We are emotionally disengaged, but the figures often put us in conflict with ourselves, and their situation is apt to put us under stress” (p. 92). Roemer concludes the “Disconnected” chapter by arguing that we “are engaged in a contradictory process that has us alternately separate and connected, frightened and delighted, troubled and entertained, pinioned and released” (p. 94). This contradictory process is further examined via the narrative and textual analysis of Woody Allen’s 1977 film *Annie Hall* included in the chapter of the same title.

While *Shocked but Connected* is an entertaining foray into understanding the complexities of the comedy process, those readers seeking *sustained* and *detailed* critical analysis of how comedy works may be disappointed. The links made between comedy theory and the interesting examples cited may be, for some readers, rather brief and underdeveloped in places. For example, in the “Surprise” chapter it is noted that as “the surprise must strike suddenly, we cannot be forewarned. Speed is essential; all comic theories stress brevity. Comedians speak and move quickly. So do visual gags” (p. 4). Some readers will be disappointed by the lack of discussion here surrounding these comedic theories and how brevity specifically operates in verbal and visual comedy. This lack of detailed discussion or reference to existing literature on verbal and/or visual comedy (e.g. Chiaro 1992; Neale & Krutnik 1990) is surprising given that in the first few pages of the book the author notes that what “this book attempts is a synthesis, built largely on the insights of others, that might be useful in our time” (p. x). The brevity evident here in Roemer’s own writing may be testament to the book’s structure. Each chapter is separated into sections and short subsections. As a result information is presented in brief “bite-sized chunks”. In some cases these “bite-sized chunks” consist of just one sentence (e.g. p. 168). However, this may be unsurprising given that the subtitle of the book is “notes on laughter”!

Shocked but Connected aims to encourage us to adopt a critical approach to understanding film comedy. It contributes to our understanding of the inner workings of film comedy and its reception, and in doing so it also examines the meaning of the comic in both our everyday lives and wider society. Despite the shortcomings noted above, the book will be of particular interest to comedy practitioners and students and academics in comedy studies, film studies and cultural studies.

Sharon Lockyer

Brunel University, United Kingdom
email: Sharon.Lockyer@brunel.ac.uk

References

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