

Book review

Clements, Paul (2020). *The Outsider, Art and Humour*. New York: Routledge.

In 2020, Routledge published the third Paul Clements's book, this one also with a discussion on humour. Paul Clements, researcher in the field of Arts, wrote his fourth book in which he showed the immense wideness of Art – we can trace it in politics, everyday life, exclusion and, of course, in humour and vice versa: we can trace humour in art. The author's focus, in general, can be traced in art and the concept of the outsider: a red line of the author's studies, this time intertwined with humour – laughable, critical, satirical, cynical, and everything in between.

Humour is, on the one hand, involved in everyday phenomena; we can trace it almost in every step. But, on the other, it is an “ambiguous phenomenon that is highly contextual and relative to time and place” (p. 1). At this point Clements parallels humour to the arts and starts the introduction of his new book, published at the renowned publisher Routledge. The author invites the reader into the topic at the beginning of the Introduction, where he explores the common features of arts and humour with street art (e.g. in the graffiti *Bill posters is innocent*), its interpretation and development: humour is spontaneous and has structure and contextual character; that is why it often escapes control. It is also a key to get insight into society and its cultural conventions, values, taboos, ideological issues, etc. Clements raises theoretical issues and discusses viewpoints of humour as a “cultural weapon of the dispossessed and foil to privilege, but also tool of the powerful” (p. 9) already in Introduction. He also refers to the key concept of this book, which is connected to humour: *cultural recuperation*. All these concepts form the discussion frame of further eight chapters.

The second chapter “Approaches to humour and laughter” brings together different research approaches to humour, and underlines its complexity, and scope. It introduces and evaluates the major theories of humour, from Freud (free play of ideas), Palmer (the role of the fool and the clown), Boal (a joker as a facilitator), Eagleton (political and moral ambiguities), Watson (legitimacy) to Morreall, Rancière, Berger, Bakhtin, Sciama, Sontag, Schneegans, Higgle, and many others. The author leans on Kuipers for the general overview of sociological understandings of humour. The chapter thoroughly discusses these approaches and theories and applies them to the works of Jean Michel Basquiat, Banksy, Chaïm Soutine, George Maciunas (together also with some statements of those artists), etc. The theories bring forth the author's discussions on the “omnivorous taste, class and distinction” (p. 23), “the ethical, political and functional aspects of humour” (p. 30) and “exclusion” (p. 35). The chapter intertwines the most relevant research and sociological, anthropological, psychological theories with the humorous material that is included in different kinds of art (cinematic, painted, graffiti) taken from the different periods (e.g. contemporary street graffiti, on one hand, and, on the other, the painting by Pere Borrell del Caso from 1874) and places (e.g. Banksy as street artist, on one hand, and Maciunas's photograph as a museum artefact, on the other).

The third chapter “The construct of outsider. Media labelling, ‘Othering’ and excluded minds” and the fourth one “The construct of outsider: Identity, the body and representation” discuss multifaceted, mediated, and self-styled constructs of the complex and often romanticised concept of the (bohemian) outsider, its symbolic marking and institutional effects,

as well as its social exclusion. The discussion is based on major and well-known theories proposed by Foucault, Levitas, Eagleton, Chomsky, Durkheim, Marx, Bourdieu, etc. The author emphasises the most typical exclusions related to poverty, dysfunctionality, criminality, disability, poor health, namely the ones that are most visible in society and stand on the ground of the binary of us vs. them, insider vs. outsider, and the strong function of relevant stereotypes. These are linked with humour, which deals with social relations and power, thematising also taboo subjects, where humour is utilised to reinforce normality. Linked with reinforcing normality, the artist is discussed also as an outsider appearing to exist beyond society. This is a romantic position which is supposed to allow for a critical distance. The exclusion, which may refer to authentic criminality, poverty or mental health, must be considered also from the point of inclusion to gain the whole insight of the concept. In the manner of the artist as an outsider, the author discusses the work of mentally ill artists, which has considerable influence on modern avant-gardists. Discourses of the outsider are discussed as a broader representational issue of identity, language, performance and ideology, which shape the production and consumption of humour and the arts: it is multi-dimensional and initially refers to conceptualisations of identity, essentialism, symbolic marking, and performance. Humour in this discussion presents “the transgression [which] highlights ambiguity towards the ‘other’ [...], which incorporates the rejection of disability” (p. 61).

The chapter “The construct of outsider: Identity, the body and representation” constitutes a discussion on excluded bodies and cultural dialogue, which is based on the Bakhtinian and classical body as well as the grotesque body, though perceived with the changeability through time: the ugly and the comic are associated with lewd ‘popular’ culture, which relies hugely on the time-place context. Bakhtin’s (1984 [1965]) ideal notion of folk humour as people’s laughter is exposed, and its ambivalent and utopian character is stressed and presented in contrast to negative and superior forms of satire employed by the pompous and privileged. People’s laughter is triumphant but mocking, assertive whilst denying, and directed at everyone including those laughing. Even grotesque bodies in these examples are employed positively, not as marginalised individuals (e.g. the prints from Otto Dix). The “highbrow cultural idea” is framed as an opposite, where imperfection is kept at a distance (e.g. Jacques Callot; Richard Gibson’s work othering through the superior forms of humour; photography of Diane Arbus and Bruce Davidson).

The chapter “Humorous representations of the outsider” takes a deeper look into hybridity, utility and the carnivalesque. Examples that highlight hybrid superiority, especially racist stereotypes, are taken from ‘popular’ culture, including the TV animation *Tom and Jerry* and the film *Borat*. These cinematic examples also support the important concept discussed in this chapter, namely *incongruity* (as conceptualised by Carroll 2014), which can lead to racism and exclusion. The Chapter brings forth the problematising of nationalism and racism as a way to situate the ‘other’, as do jokes that focus on the disabled body or mind, sexual orientation, or gender stereotypes. The author bases wider discussions on the topic of art, exclusion, and racism on historically ground-breaking exhibitions such as *Entratete Kunst* in 1937, the *Entratete Music* (1938), as well as on the history of ‘blackface’ in theatre and film. The chapter shows the negative and reactionary social utility of humour and explores its everyday sociopolitical functions.

The chapter “Representations of humour by marginal artists” shows the multidimensional character of discourse and resistance from creative underground with regard to diversity and utopian and avant-garde ideals. It discusses humorous representations through the visual arts and literature. The author gives three overlapping models of marginal art, their definition and evolution with naming the artists: *Outsider Art*, *Welfare Art* and *Savant Art*. Through a wide historical overview, he shows how these models of marginal art became of interest for those

with ‘highbrow’ taste. The discussion is illustrated by many examples of humorous art forms: visual art (Prisbrey, Bloom, Wilson, etc.), writers (Bukowski, Kerouac, Kesey, Baxterm, Jiagoo, etc.) and also music (Ian Dury).

The chapter “Creative outsider spaces and dark heterotopias” explores humour theoretically and in practice in the ‘architectural’ place; it offers liminal spatial understanding of concrete spaces, such as cemeteries and prisons. The chapter covers a range of alternative symbolic meanings particularly within the urban sphere, with reference to the works of Foucault (1967) and Lefebvre (1991). The look into public spaces reveals the employed irony and satire. The examples of art in this chapter include architecture: parks and, not really expected for this topic, cemeteries. As one of the art forms, the freak show is also discussed as a carnivalesque space. The last discussed place in the chapter is prison; the author included his own painting *Dinner Time on F Wing*: he explained the background of the painting and the humorous details.

The final chapter “Transgression, spectacle and political correctness” discusses humour as challenging expectations and binary thinking stretched between fixed and relative conceptualisations of truth, work and leisure. It discusses political correctness, resistance and comic (im)morality. The chapter elaborates on the term of *unlaughter*, based on humour as criticism of society with the help of political actions, creations, and clowning events. The natural development leads to the question of political correctness in relation of humour, offence, and the creative role of humour in the articulation of diverse identities.

Paul Clements finishes his book with “Afterthoughts”, where he rounds up all the topics of the book with his final thoughts, and underlines that his original intention of employing humour as a method to better understand representations of the outsider and exclusion through the visual arts in particular has reaffirmed the complexity of meaning (p. 184). The book is finished with the word *funny*, the most expected word in the context of humour, but so rarely used when we go into deeper levels of humour. The lightened end of the book loosens up the social tensions and engaged humour, which are discussed throughout the book.

The book *The Outsider, Art and Humour* is an interdisciplinary book, which intertwines all the elements in the title, points at exclusion, and shows different trends and limits of political correctness in the ever-changing social landscape. Each chapter deals with specific themes and approaches, engaging different theoretical backgrounds and analytical methods: from anthropology, philosophy, and folklore to sociology and art research, and brings a thorough analysis of humour in the art, both classical and modern: paintings, photography, cinematography, graffiti, architecture, shows, as well as literature and music, and intertwines them everyday humour, such as jokes and word games. The analysis is performed through the lenses of sociological, psychological, philosophical, anthropological theories, and tries to reach the whole picture of engaging humour in art. Most of the terms all the way from madness to identity are thoroughly defined and described mostly on the basis of concepts from Foucault, Carroll, and Freud; the dialogical structure and the absurd and carnival chaos are defined on the basis of Bakhtin’s concepts (although at the end the author expresses sceptical thoughts about its connection to contemporary culture), from where the author also derives his understanding of satire, irony, etc. All the theoretical discussion is supported by illustrative material in the book, which helps the reader to understand the discussion.

The book is very complex and demands an attentive reader; nevertheless, it is written in a way that even non-specialists in art or in other related fields can understand all the complex concepts and the author’s interpretations, which is a great value of scientific work. The book is a great contribution to the study of art and humour.

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