

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

Humor: International Journal of Humor Research. Vol. 1, no. 1. Edited by Victor Raskin. Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988. 98 pages. Paper DM38.—(this issue), DM148.—(complete volume); ISSN 0933-1719.

Humor—the mirthful perception of incongruity, often accompanied by facial and bodily movement of “laughter,” and perceived as mirthful by others—is pervasive among humankind. Should humor constitute an autonomous field of study? The justification for this new journal—edited by Victor Raskin, a linguist and professor of English at Purdue University in the United States, and produced by a major academic publisher—is that humor is an interdisciplinary field in the making. The study of humor (somewhat like that of its phenomenal complement, the study of play) falls among a wide variety of academic disciplines. Thus humor research tends more to the textual and the cognitive, and is dominated by literary studies, linguistics, and psychology, while play research is predominantly behavioral and is located especially in anthropology and psychology.

A declared aim of the journal is to provide a scholarly and scientific meeting ground for humor research, one that will provide such work with recognition, visibility, and academic respectability—all of which are lacking in attitudes towards this field (as they are towards that of play). In this regard the journal is off to a good start. Yet there is a profound difference between a forum that facilitates the co-presence of different disciplines and one that actively encourages, even demands, that they pay serious attention to one another—if only to highlight where their premises and prospects part company. The former fragments the field into disciplinary perspectives. It is interdisciplinary only in that different articles lie cheek-by-jowl within the same volume, under the same rubric. This is markedly the case in this first issue of *Humor*. The latter is more open to theoretical cross-pollenization, and unifies. In this regard, *Humor* should not be humored, but encouraged in the latter direction—towards the crossing (and even the erasure) of disciplinary boundaries, and towards relating to cognate fields of study, like that of play (perhaps through special issues or through state-of-the-art papers).

This issue offers a cross-section of articles that represent various perspectives and disciplines. The lead article, “Disciplinary Boundaries in Humorology: An Anthropologist’s Ruminations,” by Mahadev Apte, is a wide-ranging argument as to why humor should be studied in its own right, as the field of “humorology.” Related to this, as he notes, is the problem of whether one searches for manifestations of humor in order to concentrate on these, or whether one studies less fleeting phenomena whose catchment likely would also include humor. The problem is worth more extensive debate in this journal. Apte suggests that the concept of “humor” parallels that of “language” in linguistics, “culture” in anthropology, and “personality” in psy-

chology. (Here he is close to committing a logical fallacy, in that "humor" is treated both as the name of the phenomenon and as the concept used to discuss the former.) He suggests that a definition of humor should contain the following components: (a) that any act, event, object, or person can function as a locus of incongruity, and so as a potential trigger for humor; (b) that the mind makes sense of incongruity and becomes mirthful; and (c) that this is reflected overtly, often in smile and laughter. Apte's perspective on humor often is close to those of others on play, and could usefully relate to the latter—for example, in considering whether the role of metacommunication (in Gregory Bateson's terms) frames humor as cognition, or socially as the overt expression of a mirthful state of mind.

The next two articles, linguistic in orientation, apply Victor RASKIN's (1985) script-based semantic theory of humor. Raskin has argued that in order for a text to be "funny" it must be compatible with two different lexical "scripts" that are related, but are opposed, to each other. A "semantic recursion trigger" enables the text to evoke more than one script. In "Semantics and Madison Avenue: Application of the Semantic Theory of Humor to Advertising," Nancy Allen suggests that a humorous TV advertisement offers one script in a way that leads viewers into adopting momentarily an opposite script, one that indeed conveys the intended message of the advertiser. Allen might have added that this technique enables such opposition to safeguard the product in the following ways. Opposition is simulated so as to occupy all of the viewer's semantic space. Within this, a role for the viewer is constructed, and the advertisement text is playfully subverted. On the one hand, viewer involvement is stimulated through opposition, while on the other no real antagonism is generated, since all of this is only pretend. The parallels with certain approaches to play phenomena are obvious.

In "Puns: The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful" (the resemblance of the article to the macaroni western is coincidental), Matthew Marino argues that an evaluation of puns is not simply a matter of taste. Instead, script-based semantics make possible critical judgments on the quality of puns. This perspective also highlights affinities among puns, jokes, and riddles. Thus a joke is effected when there is a complete switch from one script to another. A bad pun results from a mere coincidence of scripts. A good pun requires the intentional, simultaneous entertaining of two scripts, that creates deeper resonances of meaning from their interaction. The solution to the riddle, however, creates a whole new script. Again, interdisciplinary indexing would be helpful. Thus, Michael LIEBER (1976) has argued that the answer to a riddle is the discovery of its holism (i.e., the integrity of a single, new "script"), which was obscured initially by the riddle block. The riddle is a problem in part-whole relations.

In "Mirthful Laughter and Blood Pressure," William Fry and William Savin discuss experimental results that correlate "mirthful behavior" (the physical chuckle or laugh) with intense elevations of blood pressure. They argue that it is such physical movement, and not the emotion of mirth, that correlates with physiological change. Mirth, they contend, may stimulate blood circulation. One might expect a more substantial discussion from Fry, who has published a major systemic perspective on humor (FRY 1963). Here it would be interesting to consider their findings in relation to those of Michael Mair (a physician and semiotician) who, over a decade ago, found that laughter simultaneously "shook up" and reordered functioning in a number of domains—physiological, cognitive, social.

This issue closes with "Humor As a Process of Defense: The Evolution of Laughing," by Janice Porteous. Following on the work of Srouffe and Waters, smiling

and laughing in infants is considered as a system of tension-release, of relaxation, one that also enables the infant to stay orientated toward novel or incongruous stimulation, as well as to maintain organized behavior. Porteous speculates that laughing originated as a primitive protective response to startling, intolerable stimulation from which there was no escape. Then the "helplessness" of laughter—a way of relaxing the organism—might be more adaptive than the positive feedback of overstimulation, which would drive the organism to destruction. This perspective could be applied, for example, to the understanding of laughter in response to jokes. As one follows the paradigm shift (or script switch) of a joke, one is suddenly and perhaps inescapably trapped by its punch line. Laughter then incapacitates and modulates the stimulus of the joke, reordering a condition of equilibrium in the person.

Humor also contains a useful Newsletter section, edited by Lawrence Mintz, that carries news of conferences and other items of interest to the study of humor. Certainly there should be a respected place for this new journal, and one wishes it well. But I hope that it will also dare to forge original perspectives on what is indeed a domain of human creativity.

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Play and Culture. Volume 2, no. 1, February 1989. Journal published by the Association for the Study of Play. Garry Chick, editor. Appears quarterly in February, May, August, and September. Subscription to Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc., Box 5076, Champaign, Illinois, U.S.A. 61820. Subscription is \$28.00 plus \$4.00 (surface mail) or \$16.00 (air mail). ISSN 0894-4253.

A most interesting interdisciplinary journal to appear recently in international research circles is the journal *Play and Culture*. Formerly founded in 1974 as The Association for the Anthropological Study of Play, the Association for the Study of Play has been serving as a forum for exchanges of ideas and research findings on play, not only by anthropologists, but also by scholars in the fields of sociology, psychology, history, child development, physical education, leisure study, literature, and linguistics. As an international, multi-disciplinary organization, the association defines the scope of play study in the broadest sense to include competitive games, uncompetitive play, leisure and recreation activities; toys, sports, animal play, festivals, and dances. The association's stated policy is to "Further our understanding of the phenomenon of play in humans and in animals, and across various cultural, social, and activity settings."