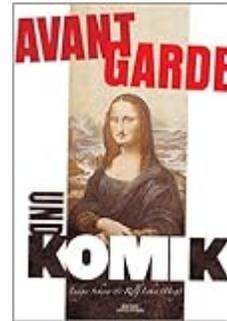




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Humor as a Playground for the Avant-Gardes

In his very brief observations about the avant-garde and humorism, Renato Poggioli refers to a staggering number of concepts and terms, all of which range within the wide field of humor or “Komik”: irony; grotesque; black humor or, as André Breton preferred to say, “black bile,” the “spleen” of Baudelaire; word play; nonsense verse; parody; caricature; pastiche; “fumisterie”; and the idea of the buffoon.[1] The anthology *Avantgarde und Komik* makes a laudable effort to discuss the relationship between the avant-garde and humor or comedy and presents us with a wide variety of perspectives on how we might understand the combination of these two terms or concepts in their historical positioning.

Seventeen of the nineteen articles collected here are based on papers presented at the 2003 meeting of the “Deutsche Romanistentag” in Kiel and cover works and movements from the nineteenth century to today. They focus on the avant-gardes in France, Italy, Spain, and Latin America, with two additional and solicited articles broadening the scope to include Germany and the Netherlands. As the editors readily admit, the combination of avant-garde and humor has not been a much-

investigated area, and, for that reason, may open up a *Spannungsfeld* that can test the borders of both terms as well as uncover possible and possibly fruitful overlaps. Humor serves as critique and as a cultural technique, with chaotic but also group-affirming aspects, and the editors insist on humor’s janus-faced characteristics inasmuch as it is either “harmlos-korrektiv” or “normensprengend-transgressiv” (p. 8). The editors’ distinction between “Humor” and its “systemstabilisierende Funktion,” contrary to their preferred “Komik,” as a more transgressive form is a bit confusing here and not explained in greater detail. They situate the avant-garde in a similar context, though, emphasizing the “Gestus des Traditionsbruches” (p. 9), the radical fight against the bourgeoisie, the military metaphor that places the avant-garde at the breaking point of social, political and aesthetic borders, and the historical relevance of the term or paradigm itself that has resulted in the increased differentiation of avant-garde movements. For this volume, the significance of combining the two terms lies in the close analysis of their transgressive elements, and, as the editors claim, it is time to examine the “komisch-hedonistischen” tendencies of the avant-garde rather

than continue to concentrate exclusively on the “seriö[s]-utopischen” aspects.

The essays collected here face this challenge with varying success, and they follow a simple historical chronology. Sabine Schrader begins with a discussion of the Italian movement “Scapigliatura” (1860-1880) that marks the pre-avant-garde. She is interested in Carlo Dossi’s concept of “umorismo” as a variant of modern skepticism, and the potential of parodies and absurd stories to undermine the prevalence of traditional literature, albeit carefully emphasizing that their ambivalent assessment as an avant-garde includes the interest in romantic ideas. Her essay also marks the beginning of a great many contemplations, throughout the entire volume, about how to distinguish between the many forms of “Komik” pointed out above with the help of Poggioli. Tatiana Bisanti’s work on the poetry of Aldo Palazzeschi, particularly “Poemi” (1909) and “L’Incendiario” (1910), looks at the inspiration derived from Palazzeschi’s discovery of Nietzsche and his subsequent fashioning as an acrobat. Of particular interest are Palazzeschi’s tendencies towards humor that he shared with the Futurists, and Bisanti correctly emphasizes that “Komik, Humor, Karikatur und Zynismus” do not present an antithesis of the avant-garde, but are particularly integral to the Futurist theater and the Futurists’ celebration of the theatrical (p. 58). Appropriately, Donatella Chiancone-Schneider’s essay investigates the combination of Futurism and humor more generally, and she distinguishes between the Futurists’ “intentionale Komik, Selbstironie und unfreiwillige Komik” (p. 76). The works she consults include Palazzeschi’s “E lasciatemi divertire!” (literature), Boccioni’s “La risata” (art), the manifestoes for the theater, and the two manifestoes for a Futurist cinema from 1916 and 1938 respectively, highlighting the elements of political satire, literary parody, and surreal humor.

With Paul Geyer’s article on Apollinaire’s humor we move from the Italian towards other European avant-gardes (Apollinaire’s Polish-Italian origins notwithstanding). After some musings about the limits of “Komik” and “Humor” based on Pirandello’s distinction between the two, Geyer explains Pirandello’s importance for Apollinaire’s 1913 manifesto “L’Antitradition Futuriste” and for his poem “Chantre.” While the reading of the manifesto delivers an expert look at Apollinaire’s mocking of the Futurists, the discussion of the poem is very short. The next essay by Thilo Bock is dedicated to laughter, or rather the impossibility of same, in Hugo Ball’s Dadaism. Bock criticizes the reception of Ball’s famous sound poems as having mistaken the poems for nonsense; in con-

trast, he argues, Ball celebrates the performance of his poems to counter the nonsense of traditional literature and elevates himself to the level of priest to forestall any interactivity with the audience. As such, his performances remain firmly situated between irony and cynicism. With Elisabeth Lange’s article we leave the fields of literature and theater for a discussion of Erik Satie and humor in music. In a most insightful presentation of Satie, Lange points out his dependence on the comic as symptomatic in his search for new forms of music and against Wagner’s romantic bombast.

We turn again to Italy and to an interpretation of Massimo Bontempelli’s 1919 “La vita intensa” by Peter Gahl. A post-Futurist, Bontempelli’s focus on the comic is evident in his series of micro-novels that play with Futurist concepts and ideas while presenting a novel approach to the “romanzo dei romanzi.” Gahl identifies the novels’ subversion of traditional narrative techniques and argues that these early texts point to later forms of magic realism. Joachim Schultz casts a wider net with regard to humor and the avant-garde, concentrating on otherness in the European avant-garde in general, including the primitive, the concept of the savage cannibal, and savage language. His focus is on “komische Kannibalen,” on “komische TÄnne” and on “komische Sprache,” thereby teasing out the differences between the strange and the comical and the cultural hazards and benefits therein. Claude Cahun’s “HÄroÄnes” provides the topic for Andrea Oberhuber’s essay and the only focus on the New Woman and the avant-garde. Cahun’s re-writing of female figures, such as Sappho and Salome, is accompanied by a considerable element of parody and anticipates Surrealist poetics. With Hanno Ehrlicher’s investigation of play and violence in the theater of the avant-garde, we return to Apollinaire’s work and to that of Roger Vitrac. Ehrlicher argues that violence and humor have an antagonistic relationship in avant-garde theater, resulting, in the case of Vitrac, in a cruelty of laughter.

Mechthild Albert introduces us to humor and the media in the Spanish avant-garde in general, and to Ramón Gámez de la Serna’s “radiohumorismo” of the late twenties and early thirties in particular. Albert’s excellent essay evaluates the ambivalence of the avant-garde towards new media and uncovers its simultaneous fascination with the media’s powers. Correspondingly, Katharina Niemeyer acquaints us with humor in the Latin American avant-garde, highlighting the use of humor as a strategy to find positions for the avant-garde within modernism and modernity. Hers is also an excellent essay and, indeed, on occasion, an amusing read. Thomas

Stauder gives more specific attention to an individual author, the Basque Gabriel Celaya, in particular Celaya's affiliation with Surrealism and his theater of the 1930s. Here, Stauder seeks to revise Celaya's reception as an author of protest poems.

Parody is at the center of Klaus D. Beekman's research, and he examines its relevance for the Dadaists, the Expressionists, and the postwar avant-garde, including a critical assessment of Kurt Schwitters' so-called parodies. Rolf Lohse connects André Breton's "Anthologie de l'humour noire" (1940) with definitions of humor by the "Académie de l'humour français" (1923). Stephan Rupp is interested in Ionesco's dramatic technique to produce humor, and he analyzes the dramatist's warping of situational elements and the work of the actors in this process. Oulipo and the "Collège de Pataphysique" are under investigation in Ludger Scherer's article. Scherer is interested in presenting the linkage between these two institutions and the parallels that connect the founding of one in 1948 to the founding of the other in 1961. Sylvia Setzkorn, then, continues with presenting the comical elements in Oulipo and Oplepo (founded in 1990), focusing especially on the French writer Jacques Roubaud and the Italian author Ermanno Cavazzoni. Finally, Gerhild Fuchs includes yet another aspect of humor, the picaresque, and compares the work of three authors of the Italian neo avant-garde, Luigi Malerba, Gianni Celati, and Sebastiano Vassali. She argues convincingly that they push the borders of narrative yet again and show that humor and the avant-garde

have not necessarily reached the end of their mutual inspiration.

Unsurprisingly, this collection of articles, based on conference papers that do not seem to have been changed substantially, leaves the reader to pick and choose from the wealth of information offered. The sheer range of avant-gardes covered in *Avantgarde und Komik* is impressive, and this reader, at least, is eager to go and explore some of the authors, artists, and movements further. Although the editors suggest the use of "Komik" rather than humor, most of the contributors do not clearly identify the discrepancies and differences between the many forms "Komik" may take, in fact, they add terms to Poggioli's list. What is surprising is the striking absence of women in this substantial parade of authors and artists, and, given the available literature on women and the avant-gardes, the inclusion of women in the debate on humor and the avant-garde should have been obvious. This volume, then, does not offer in-depth or ample theoretical debates on the combination of "Komik" and "Avantgarde," but it does offer inspiration for further studies on the topic. As such, it should be of value to those interested in broadening the research on the avant-gardes to include that which is lighthearted as well as acerbic about these movements, artists, and authors.

Note

[1]. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 140-143.

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