

Beyond the Banana Skin

Review: *Lacan, Psychoanalysis, and Comedy*, Edited by Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler, Cambridge University Press 2016 ISBN 978-1-107-08617-3

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Patricia Gherovici has a knack for producing books that sum up a moment so neatly that you hardly have to actually read them, though doing so is always a pleasure as well as importantly informative. *Please Select Your Gender* was one of those, and though it has a less catchy title, *Lacan, Psychoanalysis, and Comedy* may prove to be another. (The Freud Museum certainly thinks so, with a day conference on the subject of comedy and psychoanalysis in May 2019). However, it is a different kind of moment, and one that both Freud and Lacan have tried to capture without resounding success. This moment is the one when laughter becomes as important as dreams in psychoanalysis. Gherovici calls this the ‘paradigm swerve, a Freudian slip on a banana peel.’ The problem with prat falls, though, is when no one laughs – or no one even notices. And it has been three years now since the book was published.

Gherovici and Steinkoler have assembled a lovely collection of essays, two by themselves, one by Dany Nobus and others by psychoanalysts, literature and philosophy academics ...all Lacanians. If you are looking for laughs, it has to be said that this book is no funnier than Freud’s one, unless you like the retro- and non-PC humour of Richard Prince, which is given a good airing by Simon Critchley. (I personally find the Freud one quite funny.) Other philosophers writing in this collection are Alenka Zupančič, and Geoff Boucher who engages with Žižek. In other chapters there is a strong strand of clinical material from psychoanalysts and a satisfying dialogue with literature (Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Henry James.)

It is notoriously difficult to talk interestingly about humour, because of the problem of trying to explain a joke. But then, outside the clinical setting, the same is true of dreams, surely? W.H. Auden said there is

nothing more frightening than someone trying to tell you their dream. Which may be why both are so suited to the pursuit of the evanescent that is the essence of psychoanalysis.

I remember having a lot of fun reading *The Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths with a group of sixth formers before I had read psychoanalysis or any of the theory that underpins this book. (The play is referenced several times in *Lacan, Psychoanalysis, and Comedy*) It was infectiously funny in its first Act but we found ourselves becoming deflated and depressed by the end. Thinking about jokes isn't much of a laugh. And when I was training as a psychodynamic counsellor, more than twenty years ago, we were firmly told that anything funny in a session should be analysed rather than colluded with. So, my own paradigm shift happened as a trainee at the Site more than a decade ago when my supervisor suggested that I should hope that one day my patient – who cried a lot – would laugh. 'Why would she laugh?' I asked. 'I don't know', said my supervisor, 'but it can't all be tragedy, can it?' A few weeks later the patient actually told me something funny that had happened, and she did laugh.

Many at The Site will not need converting to the banana skin, having read Roustang long ago and knowing that it is not only patients who need to be helped to laugh. We have suspected for a while that Freud's slim volume of 1905 may be as important as the fat one of 1900. This book focuses the several different perspectives of humour from philosophical and literature studies into a psychoanalytic frame, albeit a rather relentlessly Lacanian one. What perhaps is fascinating in some patients is the way they hover like a Beckett scene between the comic and the tragic, or in others the way their repetitive gallows humour is so like Joyce (as two chapters point out). In the short laugh, Gherovici and Steinkoler remind us, is the contemporary psychoanalytic approach to (or, following Fink, *against*) understanding. Laughter may take the place of the latent content and the interpretation. Or of the cut. Gherovici thinks she may have helped her female patient to laugh, Critchley likens the repetition of Prince's jokes to a sticking in the throat akin to an *unheimlich* manoeuvre. I liken the joke, humour, laughter, comedy in the consulting room to Freud's mycelium, and to those silences which can fall in a session.

CUP no doubt have their commercial reasons for the appearance of this book, but I find it bizarre and not very funny to be reading of light, eclectic and contemporary ideas in a book with such old-fashioned production values. The strong hard covers would easily withstand being dumped behind the bike sheds on a Friday night not to be retrieved until Monday morning. The reference protocol is very cumbersome, with full citation details in footnotes and only a selection of 'Works Cited' at the end of each chapter. It seems designed in the age of the typewriter. It is also full of typos.

Do not be put off by the appearance of the book itself, though. In our age, after the Charlie Hebdo massacre (as Gherovici and Steinkoler remind us) and of a terrifyingly laughable US President, we need this. It is worth sponging down on a Monday morning and clutching as the week begins, not least as a reminder to look for the comedy.