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Professional Resource:

*A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire
Shaped Post-9/11 America* (2011)

Joseph Faina

Department of Communication Studies, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, USA

A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America, edited by Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene. (2011). University of Mississippi Press: Jackson, MS.

Books about the lasting impacts of 9/11 have become somewhat of an academic cottage industry, especially in the fields of American studies, media studies, cultural studies, and communication studies. While academic discourses involving 9/11 have become nearly as numerous—and as fragmented—as media coverage of the event itself every so often a work offers a glimpse into a specific set of discourses that offer a fresh perspective on the cultural and media environment cultivated during that era. Jeffrey Melnick's *9/11 Culture: America Under Construction* (2009) is one such work that synthesizes a set of interrelated texts to highlight the various cultural responses to the events of September 11, 2001. Another set of fresh perspectives is offered by *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, edited by Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene.

The focus on satire and irony in the collected essays in this volume is deliberate. The underlying premise of the volume is that humor, as specifically related to irony and satire, is a particularly useful way to understand the increasingly complex media environment stemming from the cultural moment of 9/11. While political humor and satire have enjoyed “something of a renaissance since its short-lived death after 9/11” (132), what this book attempts to provide is a concerted effort to catalog “the ways in which specific cultural and media productions (from stand-up comedy to television to political cartoons) often function to destabilize and reinforce the status quo at the same time.”

The link between 9/11 and new media discourses is well documented. Melnick (2009) notes “a consensus has developed that the events of 9/11 contributed to the rapid development of Web 2.0 in the early twenty-first century” (13). Furthermore, humor is a particularly useful way to understand media structures because of its play with linguistic conventions. Gray et al. (2008) argue that parody in particular is a powerful “media literacy educator” because of its reliance on recognition and manipulation of discursive forms (18). These two trajectories are most notably addressed in Giseline Kuipers's essay on “digital disaster jokes and the functions of laughter after 9/11” (20-46). Focusing primarily on visual humor, Kuipers illustrates the ways in which “all of the Internet jokes use existing visual material” to create darkly humorous responses to the attacks (37). The title of the essay “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” is further alluded to in a visual image depicting the famed movie monster straddling the World Trade Center towers fending off incoming airplanes. As Kuipers notes, this borrowing of preexisting images and juxtaposition of existing visual conventions is not only a major underlying feature of the humor of digital disaster jokes, their very creation highlights a change in which Internet media technologies have enabled individuals to edit, alter, and produce their own visual images out of a bricolage of content on the Web. One of the most significant ways this was illustrated, Kuipers argues, was in the creation of a series of visually stark, crass jokes.

Other chapters take a more traditional approach to analyzing communicative responses to discourses emerging from 9/11. Contrasting with Kuipers's focus on humor stemming from technological changes in media production, several essays focused on more traditional media responses. David Gurney's essay on

“Late-Night Television Comedy after 9/11” focused mainly on the struggle of late-night comedy talk show hosts to parse what discourses were and were not considered appropriate (3-19). The primary case study of Bill Maher’s commentary on his now-defunct ABC show *Politically Incorrect* highlights the stakes in the reconstituted media environment. Lanita Jacobs’s essay goes one step further, focusing primarily on the ways African American stand-up comedians responded to newly perpetuated media narratives now characterizing Arabs as the most vilified minority in the post-9/11 cultural environment (47-56). Print media also received an investigation, specifically the ways in which satirical newspaper *The Onion* created spaces for dissent and resistance to dominant mass mediated narratives imposed on the country by the Bush Administration in the run up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (57-80). What is significant about these chapters is that they are placed alongside Kuipers’s essay in a section devoted to the cultural “First Responders,” highlighting the interplay and tensions between culturally entrenched network television/print practices, and the affordances of a more participatory mode of media production (vii).

These tensions play out within essays as well. Ted Gournelos’s chapter “Rethinking Trauma and Post-9/11 Politics in Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*” (81-98) analyzes the ways the understanding of 9/11 as a traumatic experience was itself a mediated construction. Providing one of the most illustrative critiques of media practices in the entire volume he writes, “[E]ven scholars who strongly claim 9/11 was a traumatic event are often struck by this disconnect between the experience of the attacks, the experience of the discourse that immediately framed/constrained/mediated them, and the response advocated by the Bush administration” (84). However while Gournelos rightly highlights that 9/11 is “remarkable as much for the quick consolidation of images into a particular narrative as it is for the sheer volume of coverage” (84) his focus on the graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* is similarly remarkable in that he provides no images of the work to illustrate his critiques. Instead he relies primarily on a textual analysis and description without delving into how the specific medium, a graphic novel, employs the visual to participate in these interventions. Gournelos, then, highlights some of the difficulties in how exactly to analyze these discourses within a context of a rapidly changing media environment.

This last point underscores a major concern for both media studies scholars and those interested in

the practice of literacy. The final section of the book takes up issues of ethics and pedagogy in an attempt to address how scholars might envision more productive analyses and media practices. Specifically, Paul Lewis’s essay proposes an “ethics of humor for the digital age” (214-232). Using the examples of comedian Jeff Dunham’s “Achmed the Dead Terrorist” routine and the controversy surrounding the Danish Newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* 2006 controversial political cartoons depicting the Muslim prophet Mohammed at the gates of heaven. “One problem with writing a book about rapidly changing trends in politics or popular culture,” Lewis opens, “is that the demands of publication compel authors to stop writing while the trends they have been studying continue to evolve” (214). This was the case for Lewis who in the midst of writing a previous book on contemporary political humor was notified of recent examples that identified where the new lines were and more importantly where they were crossed. The *Jyllands-Posten* controversy serves as his primary example. Regarding the international outrage following the publication of rather incendiary political cartoons, Lewis argues that contemporary analyses of humor “no longer describes a world in which every wag with a cell phone can film and upload comic material and gaffes, satire produced in one country is rebroadcast or otherwise distributed around the planet, and everyone with computer access can join discussions about the impact of controversial humor” (220). This development not only identifies the limitations of contemporary models for studying humor in a digital age, but it also underscores a need for new literacies that take into account an increasingly fragmented yet interconnected media environment. Lewis continues, “Perhaps, but striving harder to avoid such misunderstandings would not be a capitulation to intolerance or a form of self-censorship. It would be an exercise of craft grounded in a new, transnational sense of audience and purpose responsive to the fluid distribution of material in the digital age” (226).

To aid in initiating this discussion, the book concludes with a short piece by Arthur Berger, noted scholar of humor studies. Locating his comments in the context of 9/11 jokes he writes, “[H]umor has a role in everything, so it is quite natural that it would have a role in cultural politics, and it certainly does with pedagogy” (238). Berger’s suggestion is to focus on teaching concepts and methods rather than specific events in order to cultivate different lenses by which to view the world. Ending the book in this manner provides an

intriguing counterweight to the case studies presented in the volume. Each offers an interpretive framework by which to understand a specific instance of humor in the context of post 9/11 discourse. What might be more helpful is to consider how those frameworks might be extended to investigate humor's role in understanding an increasingly complex digital age.

References

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