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Laughing at the Body:  
Approaches to a Performative Theory of Humor

In prevalent theories of the comic, whether literary, philosophical-aesthetic, linguistic or psychological in origin, the humor of the human body plays a subordinate role. It is addressed as a humor of situation or movement, as ›lower‹ or (for the literature up to 1700) farcical humor, and therefore used as a blurry sub-type. The body is imponderable for such a concept of humor that, since Kant and Jean Paul, is subsumed under aesthetic perception and excludes the body or, at most, treats it as a phenomenon represented by language. The body is also unwieldy for linguistic and semantic theories of humor or of the joke, as they can be found in some types of cognitive models of linguistic or logic incongruity, overlap or opposition of scripts, in interdisciplinary humor research.

This article aims at uncoupling the possibilities of a humor of the human body from linguistic-semantic and ontological concepts and at exploring the topic of bodily causes for laughter in theatre and literature from a performative perspective, i. e. from the perspective of a theory of action and perception. Thereby a whole

range of problems in older literature (which up to now have been discussed within the Bakhtin concept of the ›grotesque body‹) can be analyzed, as well as the complex phenomena of ›comic figures‹ on stage and in literary texts.

The article explores two questions: 1. How can comical stagings of the body that aim at laughter be described and explained in their functioning? 2. By the aid of which linguistic strategies are these stagings produced in literary texts? In order to answer these questions, the article starts by giving a survey of the most relevant approaches towards a theory of bodily humor: Bergson's mechanism thesis, Freud's thesis of *Aufwandsdifferenz* (difference of effort) and Plessner's idea of bodily disorganization are evaluated in terms of their applicability. All three theories point out the multifold meanings of the body in comical situations or processes. Bergson assumes the comical in the sudden shift of our attention from soul to body. Freud grounds his thoughts in the psychological activity of innervation at comparing the ›effort‹ of one's own and others. Plessner views humor as a cause for laughter that overstrains the spectator and in which the tension between ›Leib sein‹ (to *be* a body) and ›Körper haben‹ (to *have* a body) becomes visible.

Thereby the body as a cause for laughter is reevaluated. Its humor is not structural, but bears the characteristics of an event. Still, the psychological effects in the interaction of comical object and laughing subject remain disputed. Consequently, the article explores the conditions and functionings of perception of the comical body by combining approaches from phenomenology and neuro-physiology. The main interest here is an understanding of laughter as ›Widerfahrnis‹ (befalling) and ›Einleibung‹ (embodiment) (Waldenfels, Schmitz, Merleau-Ponty), which findings are confirmed by the neuro-scientific theory of mirror neurons (Rizzolatti, Warren, et al.). Laughing at bodies appears to be an attentional kind of comprehension of bodily inappropriateness and loss of control in a playful frame or mode. This refers to nonverbal humor of the body in movement, proximity, mimics and gestures, in voice, para-language and body noises on the one hand, and in body related semantics of utterances on the other hand.

The humor of this cannot be described structurally or ontologically, but modally, in reference to the situation and the performance of the body in question. The last part of the article illuminates in which way this humor can be experienced outside of theatrical as-if situations, in a literary text. Here the embedding of body humor within language and the bodily quality of language are discussed. Two aspects are important: firstly, the question of how traces of comical speech and their corporal effects like intonation, emphasis, or sound can be staged in literature, and secondly, the problem of how language can ›stage‹ and ›orchestrate‹ bodies in a way that readers can perceive the humor of the body and the situational transgressions that are combined with them. The semiotic signs of the text world function as ›embodied‹ apperceptions, which are related to the phantasm of laughter as an act of distancing.

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