

H-Net Reviews

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Henry Jenkins. *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. ix + 336 pp. + 32 pp. of plates. \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-07854-2.

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How should we evaluate the early 1930s anarchistic comedies of Eddie Cantor, W.C. Fields, and the Marx Brothers? James Agee, Walter Kerr, and Gerald Mast dismissed such films for losing the “visual poetry” of silent comedy and especially for their flimsily-constructed plots and inconsistent characterization. Other critics, like Andrew Bergman and Gerald Weales, linked these films’ celebration of impulsive behavior and social breakdown to the dislocations of the early Depression years. This important book goes far beyond earlier assessments of early sound comedy by showing how these comedies gave expression to traditions of humor and performance that pre-dated cinema; how they represented a self-conscious response to the arrival of sound in film; and how their humor gave tangible expression to a broader impulse to break free from what Norbert Elias called “the civilizing process,” the internalized constraints that are a intrinsic part of structured society.

Jenkins begins this book by tracing the development of two contrasting styles of American popular humor: a restrained Victorian comic sensibility that might be termed “refined humor” or “thoughtful laughter” and a much more raucous, immediate, and shocking form of joking that was called the “new humor.” In fact, as Jenkins shows, the “new humor” was not new at all. However, a form of humor that had once been restricted to the masculine culture of saloons began to be disseminated widely in the 1880s by joke books, humor magazines, newspaper humor columns, and vaudeville theaters. The author then traces the development of what he calls the “vaudeville aesthetic”—performance conventions and stock characters that characterized variety shows and vaudeville programs, a style that conflicted sharply with that of naturalistic drama or, later, the conventions of the classic Hollywood narrative.

The introduction of sound encouraged Hollywood to lure many former vaudevillians and revue performers to the screen. Quite consciously, Jenkins shows, the film industry returned to an aesthetic it had previously rejected.

But Hollywood’s assumption that New York-style entertainment could attract large audiences in provincial areas proved problematic. To maximize audience appeal, Hollywood adopted a variety of strategies. These included a “de-Semitization” of Jewish comics, who were repackaged to appeal to a broader national audience; and “genre mixing”—“a happy melding of sophistication and hoke” (167). By late 1934, box office revenues from anarchistic comedies and comic musicals fell off, partly in response to overexposure of comic stars and the low quality of many of these films, and public outrage over the films’ reliance on scatological humor.

The book concludes with a remarkably compelling analysis of gendered laughter in early silent comedy, which shows how marital combat and gender conflict were portrayed in anarchistic comedies. Tying cinematic portrayals to broader societal tensions over husbands’ increasing inability to fulfill the breadwinner role during the Depression, Jenkins shows how class resentments were projected onto “the unruly wife” and matron and their efforts to restrain male pleasure.

In recent years, a new brand of anarchistic comedy has arrived on the screen. Like its predecessor, it “explores the relationship of the ‘natural,’ uninhibited individual to the rigidifying social order” (221). And like its earlier counterpart, it is harshly criticized for its incoherence and fragmentation. Anyone who wants to understand the historical roots of the humor and style of *Dumb and Dumber* or its imitators—or who, more generally, wants a psychologically nuanced understanding of humor’s history and functions in late nineteenth and twentieth-century American society—would not find a more insightful and illuminating study than *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*

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