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## Introduction: Laughing Out Loud

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## Introduction

*Introduction*

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### **Abstracts**

Français English

Ce numéro d'*Études britanniques contemporaines* s'intéresse aux formes spécifiques du rire, de l'humour, de la comédie et de la satire dans la littérature et les arts britanniques des XX<sup>e</sup> et XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles, et étudie la façon dont les écrivains et artistes adoptent, transforment, redéfinissent et subvertissent ces modes tout en gardant à l'esprit leur dimension souvent ambivalente. Les articles regroupés ici explorent les rapports entre le rire, la satire et la critique politique et montrent qu'en général, les œuvres contemporaines ne reposent plus sur la fonction correctrice de la satire ni sur la force d'exclusion du rire, mais privilégient une comédie portée par un élan humaniste. Un tiers du numéro est plus spécifiquement consacré à l'œuvre de Jonathan Coe.

This issue of *Études britanniques contemporaines* focuses on the specific forms of laughter, humour, comedy and satire in 20th- and 21st-century British literature and visual arts, and examines how writers and artists adopt, transform, redefine or subvert these modes while bearing in mind their often ambivalent dimension. The articles gathered here explore the relationship between laughter, satire and political criticism, and demonstrate that contemporary works generally no longer rely on the corrective function of satire and the exclusionary power of laughter, but favour a type of comedy that is fuelled by a humanist drive. One-third of the issue is more specifically devoted to the work of Jonathan Coe.

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### **Index terms**



**Mots-clés :** littérature britannique, humour, comédie, satire, rire

**Keywords:** british literature, humour, comedy, satire, laughter

## Full text

1 In October 2015, Jonathan Coe remarked: ‘2015 might well go down in history as the year in which humanity lost its sense of humour’ (2015a). On 7th January of that year, cartoonists Charb, Cabu, Honoré, Tignous, Wolinski and other staff members of the French satirical weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo* were killed by two gunmen following their publication of satirical cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. A few months later, several distinguished members of American PEN protested against the proposal to give the magazine its Freedom of Expression Courage Award because, in the words of former PEN president Francine Prose, ‘drawing crude caricatures and mocking religion’ is not quite the same as doing ‘important work that requires perseverance and courage’. For Jonathan Coe on the other hand, ‘a joke—even one that takes the form of a cartoon—might be a complex, multilayered thing, a way of conveying a complicated truth every bit as powerful as a political essay or a piece of journalism’ (2015a). These tragic events induced Coe to wonder if ‘the age of the joke [was] now coming to an end’ and if satirists and comedians would henceforth need to gloss and annotate their jokes ‘to ward off the attacks of a public possessed by an insatiable hunger for outrage’ (2015a).

2 The aim of this special issue of *Études britanniques contemporaines* is to focus on the specific forms and aspects of laughter, humour, comedy, satire, irony, farce, the grotesque and the burlesque in 20th- and 21st-century British fiction, drama and visual arts, and examine how writers and artists adopt, transform, redefine and/or subvert these modes while being aware of their often paradoxical, contradictory and unstable dimension. To understand the mechanics of laughter, critics often fall back on the three main theories of humour as ‘an appeal to superiority, to relief from restraint, or to incongruity’ (Olsen 20). The ‘superiority theory’ was postulated by Thomas Hobbes who argued that ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others’ (Hobbes IV, 46). We find ourselves laughing at inferiority and, by implication, at difference so that laughter is based on the exclusion of a group or an individual (Ilott 135). The second theory, best exemplified by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), is the ‘relief or release theory’ according to which ‘the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure’ (Critchley 3) and joking amounts to a ‘momentary overcoming of inhibitions’ (Ilott 138). Freud called this the principle of ‘economy of psychic expenditure’ (183). Finally, the ‘incongruity theory’, sketched out in the work of Kant, relies on a discrepancy or disjunction between two disparate concepts: we have come to expect certain patterns in the world and ‘[w]e laugh when we experience something that doesn’t fit into these patterns’ (Morreall 1983, 16).

3 In Jonathan Coe’s latest novel, *Number 11* (2015), a well-read Police Constable investigates the deaths of stand-up comedians and does some research into the history and philosophy of humour. He refers to the theories mentioned above, to which he adds a dismissive comment about satire and political humour by Milan Kundera:

Kundera, it seemed, looked down upon satire as a ‘thesis art’ which sought to shepherd its audience towards a preconceived political or moral position, falling short of what he saw as the real purpose of artistic creation, which was to make people aware of ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning. (Coe 2015b, 203)

4 Kundera distinguished satire from humour which ‘renders ambiguous everything it touches’ (6),<sup>1</sup> and advocated humour (rather than satire) as a weapon against totalitarian regimes. Jonathan Coe argues for his part that in the contemporary context, political satire, far from being a means of subversive protest or a threat to the



established order, enables the *status quo* to continue: laughter has become so unifying and comforting that it overpowers all opposition. For Coe, 'laughter is not just ineffectual as a form of protest, but [...] it actually *replaces* protest' (2013). According to Paul Gilroy, satire

[...] creates a welcoming space in which like-minded people can gather together and share in comfortable hilarity. The anger, the feelings of injustice they might have been suffering beforehand are gathered together, compressed and transformed into bursts of laughter, and after discharging them they feel content and satisfied. An impulse that might have translated into action is, therefore, rendered neutral and harmless. (198)

- 5 Significantly, such a comment had already been made in 1960 by Bernard Levine, the drama critic of the *Daily Express*, to refer to popular entertainment shows that preceded the satire boom of the 1960s:

Satirical revue in this country has been, until now, basically cowardly. First, it has picked on the easy targets. Second, however hard it hit the targets (and it rarely hit them at all, let alone in the middle), it left its audience alone, to leave the theatre as fat and complacent as it came in. (in Carpenter 116)

- 6 On the other hand, in *A Great, Silly Grin. The British Satire Boom of the 1960s* (2000), John Carpenter points out that the new revue *Beyond the Fringe* which opened in London in 1961 (with Alan Bennett, Jonathan Miller, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore), although not set out to be satirical in the first place, 'gradually developed into a devastating survey of the state of Britain in 1960' (120). It not only took on more challenging targets (the Prime Minister, the H-bomb, capital punishment, patriotism, the clergy, anti-Semitism) but also aimed at the audience:

[...] the final target, the real victim, the ultimate object of the whole proceedings, is the audience. It is they who feel the final punch, the last twist of the knife, who are taken up and dropped from a great height and thoroughly, healingly, beneficially, beautifully, and properly shaken in the process [...]. (Levine in Carpenter 117)

- 7 However, the process failed to last and soon enough, satire retreated into harmless comfort once again, as pointed out by Malcolm Muggeridge, a former editor of *Punch*: 'The lash falls on willing shoulders, and evokes cries, not of pain and courage, but of delight. The pleasure that is taken in contemporary satire by its victims necessarily raises certain doubts about it. Can it really be an effective antiseptic when there is absolutely no hurt?' (in Carpenter 195).

- 8 In literature and the visual arts, the relationship between laughter, satire and social and political criticism has taken many different forms since the great age of satire of John Dryden and Restoration playwrights but also Alexander Pope's and Jonathan Swift's blistering satires on human nature whose aim was to correct vices. Centuries later, the grim comedy of modernist works no longer had any pretension to correction (Colletta, Greenberg). For Lisa Colletta who examines works by Virginia Woolf, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell, modernism has lost 'faith in meaningful moral development' and 'no longer serves a corrective satirical function but instead offers the pleasurable—if only momentary—protection of laughter in the face of injustice and brutality' (5). The protection is momentary indeed as modernism favours dark humour steeped in anxiety and excels in the art of silent laughter. In 'Friendships Gallery' (1907), a mock biography of Violet Dickinson, Virginia Woolf has a wise old man declare: 'the deeper laughter is the less a man knows he is laughing; so that you may well have laughed so hard that you felt as grave as corpses' (Woolf 299). Contrary to normative comedy which relies on an explicit or implicit notion of order, black



humour, as defined by Patrick O'Neill, 'is the humour of uncertainty, lost norms, lost confidence, the humour of disorientation, the comedy of entropy' (50), one which is well suited both to the modernist and the postmodernist episteme.

9 As noted by Kirby Olson in *Comedy after Postmodernism* (2001), defining humour or comedy is a quixotic quest because what characterises comedy, as well as postmodernism, is an 'ability to resist definition' and to escape metanarratives (6). Even if the campus novels of Kingsley Amis, Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, imbued with a sense of the carnivalesque, seem firmly rooted in a national context, it often proves difficult to delineate the contours of a specifically English or British sense of humour, which may be epitomised by the fictional works of Evelyn Waugh, Tom Sharpe or P.G. Wodehouse. In the present issue, David Quantick argues that most of British humour is related to class mockery and sex comedy, and he points to the specificity of the duality of British high and low comedy.

10 What may indeed be interrogated is the place and legitimacy granted to comedy, laughter and humour in a British cultural context which often establishes a hierarchy between popular arts and mass production entertainment on the one hand, and noble arts and elitism on the other. Laughter is sometimes perceived as a synonym for an escape from reality and the comic mode as a minor art, whereas some writers and artists strongly claim their status as entertainers. In the case of literary or artistic works which are famous for their complexity—those belonging to High Modernism, avant-garde drama and poetry, but also to the microcosm of contemporary art—one may wonder whether it is possible to refer to a select type of laughter only meant for the initiated.

11 The postmodernist aesthetic has often been characterised as playful, and some critics have suggested that this preference for comic forms and structural irony led to an excessive indulgence in formal auto-referential games and to detachment from affects as well as from the tragic reality of daily life and collective traumas. It could be argued however that the comic dimension neither annihilates emotions nor precludes an ideological perspective, but provides a roundabout way to explore the ethical and political dimension of writing, and engage with humanist responses. Since the Renaissance and the 'serio ludere' tradition, it has been shown that playfulness often conceals a polemical intention and that a humorous tone can throw light on social issues. A delicate balance is therefore established between levity and seriousness, irony and ideology, humour and melancholy, comedy and ethics, laughter and humanism.

12 In line with these shifts, contemporary British playwrights have often blurred the frontier between comedy and tragedy to laugh at atrocities and cruelty, and thus take inspiration from Nell's cue in Beckett's *Endgame* (1958): 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness' (18). While Adorno claimed that after the horrors of the Holocaust, 'cheerful art' had become impossible (40),<sup>2</sup> Beckett's character insists that unhappiness is 'the most comical thing in the world' (18), and that it is possible to laugh and make others laugh when faced with the worst.<sup>3</sup> Martin Amis begs to differ in *Koba the Dread. Laughter and the Twenty Million* (2002) when comparing Stalinist Soviet Union to Nazi Germany:

[...] it has always been possible to joke about the Soviet Union, just as it has never been possible to joke about Nazi Germany. [...] In the German case, laughter automatically absents itself. *Pace* Adorno, it was not poetry that became impossible after Auschwitz. What became impossible was laughter. In the Soviet case, on the other hand, laughter intransigently refuses to absent itself. (12)



And yet, many writers and artists have proven that all historical tragedies could be submitted to uncomfortable laughter, as is the case of Amis's own novel about

Auschwitz *The Zone of Interest* (2014), in which the blustering Camp Commandant Paul Doll (a near homonym of “droll”) is a grotesquely frightening creation. Alex Clark aptly called the book ‘Holocaust comedy’ in which ‘[t]he silence, as so often, is heard in the gaps between the laughter, in the realisation that we’ve been laughing at all.’ Peter Barnes provides another example of black comedy in his play *Laughter!* (1978) which shows Yvan the Terrible in a torture chamber, impaling a man on a stake and then killing his own son, as well as office-workers organising concentration camps. Along with the destabilizing, aggressive, cynical and bitter laughter of *In-Yer-Face* drama, new forms of the absurd, of satire and wit have developed in contemporary British theatre, for example in plays by Caryl Churchill and Martin Crimp.

14 In the field of visual arts, intericonicity, interpictoriality and intermediality, as well as the recycling of images, can be a source of humour and comedy thanks to the discrepancies thus produced. This is the case in works by contemporary artists, such as David Shrigley’s simplistic and humorous drawings, Gilbert and George’s photographs and photomontages, the work of Pop Art artists (Richard Hamilton, Peter Blake, David Hockney) or the various forms of visual satire which have a strong mocking, anti-establishment or reforming potential (Yinka Shonibare or the Chapman Brothers).

15 In poetry, humour is often seen with distrust, as humorous poetry risks being assimilated to light verse (Gavin Ewart, Wendy Cope) and, because of this unbearable lightness, may not be taken seriously. It is arguably in Scotland that the comedic mode has retained its most vigorous presence (with Edwin Morgan, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, W.N. Herbert and Don Paterson), though prominent poets elsewhere have also, of course, had recourse to it (Paul Muldoon, Simon Armitage). Recent years have also witnessed a renewed turn to humour within British experimental poetry (Jeff Hilson, Tim Atkins), inspired, in part, by the influences of American poetry and popular culture.<sup>4</sup>

16 In the 1960s in Great-Britain, as mentioned earlier, a satirical revival spread in popular culture in the form of live entertainment (*The Last Laugh* and *Beyond the Fringe*), radio (*The Goon Show* with Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan), television (*That Was the Week That Was*, the Monty Python series), the press (*Private Eye*), and illustration. The character of Nigel Molesworth (by Geoffrey Willans, illustrated by Ronald Searle), a classic of graphic satire, was created in the 1950s and was followed by Ralph Steadman’s satirical drawings and caricatures, as well as the works of Steve Bell and Martin Rowson who illustrate and write satirical ‘graphic novels’, for instance Rowson’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (2012), which revisits the Blair years.

17 This rapid and necessarily schematic overview of the uses of comedy, satire, humour and laughter in various genres and artistic areas points to the multifarious forms taken by comic modes in contemporary productions. The essays included in the present issue of *Études britanniques contemporaines* offer analyses of these variations in specific works of fiction, drama and visual arts.

18 The first section is devoted to Jonathan Coe, ‘a bringer of laughter’, which Benjamin in *The Rotters’ Club* considers ‘the holiest, most sacred of callings’ (274). It includes an interview with the author, David Quantick’s illuminating essay on British high and low comedy, and four academic papers. José Ramón Prado-Pérez analyses Coe’s exploitation of parody, satire and the absurd but also and mostly intrusions of the grotesque in his novels, which provoke chaos, blur boundaries and distort reality. The grotesque elicits ambivalent laughter as it both entertains and compels the reader to engage with social and political issues. Christian Gutleben examines the ambiguity of humour in *The Rotters’ Club* which both includes and debunks postmodernist metatextual playfulness while offering a humanist touch in its ‘determination to laugh so as to avoid crying’. In this hybrid novel, Coe mixes ‘the very light comedy of sexual



jokes and linguistic malapropisms' with ruthless irony and abrupt changes of modality and tonality through the depiction of the harsh social and history reality of the 1970s in Britain. Laurent Mellet examines the various modes of laughter in Coe's fictional production and distinguishes the books marked by political or cultural satire which leads to 'humour based on distance and irony' and a 'breach in the laughing community' (in line with the theory of exclusion), and those which inscribe humour, comedy and laughter within a humanist or post-humanist context based on connection and sympathy. Jean-Michel Ganteau also adopts this ethical approach and broadens the scope by examining texts by Jeanette Winterson and Julian Barnes alongside Coe's *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*. Eschewing the theory of superiority and exclusion and drawing from James Wood's concept of the 'comedy of forgiveness' (4), Ganteau considers humour in its relation to affects as a means to protect and 'create the sense of a *common* humanity', and points to the shift in Coe's texts from 'the comedy of *correction* to the comedy of *connection*'.

19 Coe's production has often been praised for its satirical portraits of British society and the second section of the present issue, 'Contemporary Forms of Satire', focuses more particularly on the mechanics of this mode in 20th- and 21st-century fiction and visual arts. Emilie Walezak examines Rose Tremain's 17th-century historical novel *Restoration* as both a homage to the British tradition of satire (through the voice of the gullible narrator Merivel) and a postmodernist criticism of Thatcherite values, encouraging the reader to see parallels between the two periods. She explains that the novel combines 'two brands of satire: conservative satire and revolutionary satire whose difference relies on the imposition of order vs the celebration of creative disorder.' Justine Gonneaud draws attention to the specificities of Will Self's satire in *Great Apes* and *Cock and Bull*, one that is savage, grotesque, disturbing and provocative, based on a Bakhtinian reversal of order and inversion of moral values which force readers out of their comfortable position and 'into questioning their own reading practice'. Valérie Morisson analyses postmodern pastiche, postcolonial and sartorial parody and their links to carnivalesque satire in the works of the British artist of Nigerian origins Yinka Shonibare who uses masquerading and costuming as a means to probe identity construction and to convey political messages on issues of colonialism, race and sexuality.

20 The issue's third and final section, 'Destabilising Comic Boundaries', focuses on the way writers have blurred the lines that divide laughter and anxiety, amusement and suffering, farce and menace, but also the frontiers that separate high and low culture and which have condemned some writers to being neglected or ostracized. Aloysia Rousseau examines Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* and interrogates the catchphrase 'comedy of menace' which has often been applied to his plays. She argues that Pinter, by disrupting horizons of expectations and deliberately maintaining ambivalence in instances of 'comic agony', creates generic and ethical instability. Stage directors and filmmakers have found it difficult to preserve this ambiguity in their adaptation and have usually toned down this instability.

21 As a writer of comic fiction who has been praised for his self-deprecatory humour, Coe has often been placed within a tradition of serio-comic British writing incorporating Evelyn Waugh, Tom Sharpe and David Lodge, but also P.G. Wodehouse whom Thomas Foley in *Expo 58* reads 'for a bit of light relief' (37). Coe admits he had been for a long time 'stupidly snobbish about Wodehouse and reluctant even to read him' because of the lack of satire and moral seriousness in his novels. When he finally decided to read Wodehouse, he immediately admired his 'pure, unpolluted humour' and declared: 'all humour should really aspire to the condition of Wodehouse' (2013). In this special issue, Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay analyses *The Code of the Woosters* by this neglected



author, more specifically examining the mixture of high and low culture, as the novel is marked by the use of erudite intertextual references and high diction but these are often placed ‘in the most unlikely and incongruous contexts’. Far from being limited to pure entertainment and a reassuring confirmation of social hierarchies, Wodehouse’s novel satirises the English aristocracy and ‘operates a series of iconoclastic attacks’ against class, gender and the canon.

22 Another writer whose humour is underrated but who deserves more attention is Kingsley Amis whose comedies of old age, *Ending Up* and *The Old Devils*, present elderly protagonists as ‘outrageous, rebellious and contentious’, determined to go on living even in the most undignified conditions. In his article, Georges Letissier draws from Alenka Zupančič’s study of comedy to show that Amis departs from the conciliatory depiction of elderly people, humanised in their weaknesses and limitations, and able to provoke cathartic laughter. Contrarily, Amis empowers his extravagant protagonists by placing them at the forefront of his geriatric fictions and embracing an unpredictability which is both exhilarating and discomfiting. Terry Pratchett surpasses Amis and Wodehouse in being largely ignored by academia in that he suffers from the ‘triple damnation of writing popular, humorous fantasy’, as reported by Caroline Duvezin-Caubet who demonstrates that Pratchett’s *Discworld* series is more complex than meets the eye, combining subversion, satire, absurdity, jokes, slapstick, comedy of repetition and parody to produce ‘enlightened fantasy’ and engineer ‘a laughter which connects and includes instead of dehumanising’.

23 The humanistic stance is probably what most characterises the fictional and artistic works analysed in this special issue, which also contest Bergson’s famous premise that laughter is ‘incompatible with emotion’ (186) and therefore demands an exclusion of affects and a momentary anaesthesia of the heart (11). Far from the corrective and exclusionary function traditionally associated with comedy, contemporary works insist on creating communities of laughter, on laughing-with rather than laughing-at.

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## Notes

1 'Humor: the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others; humor, the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty' (KUNDERA 32).

2 'The injustice inherent in all cheerful art, especially in the form of entertainment, is an injustice against the stored-up and speechless suffering of the dead' (ADORNO 40).

3 See Laetitia Pasquet's PhD dissertation, 'Le Rire de l'horreur sur la scène anglaise contemporaine: vers une nouvelle poétique de la comédie?' (2013).

4 I would like to thank Lacy Rumsey for providing these useful references to humour in contemporary poetry.

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## About the author

### Vanessa Guignery

Vanessa Guignery is Professor of Contemporary English Literature and Postcolonial Literature at the École Normale Supérieure in Lyon and a member of the Institut Universitaire de France. Her most recent publications include a monograph, *Seeing and Being: Ben Okri's The Famished Road* (PUF, 2012), a collection of interviews with eight contemporary writers, *Novelists in the New Millennium* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), as well as a collection of essays, *The Famished Road: Ben Okri's Imaginary Homelands* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013). She is the author of several books on the works of Julian Barnes, including *The Fiction of Julian Barnes* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). She has published a monograph on B.S. Johnson, *Ceci n'est pas une fiction* (Sorbonne UP, 2009), as well as on Jonathan Coe, *Jonathan Coe* (Palgrave, 2016). She has recently edited a collection of Jonathan Coe's essays translated into French, *Notes marginales et bénéfiques du doute* (Gallimard, 2015), as well as a collection of essays *Crossed Correspondences: Writers as Readers and Critics of their Peers* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).

By this author

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[Full text]

*The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) by Michèle Roberts: a Novel of Forking Paths

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