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# HUMOR

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## Book reviews

Ulf Palmenfelt (ed): *Humor och kultur*. [Humor and culture]. 1996. NIF Publications 34. Turku, Finland: Nordic Institute of Folklore.

This recent collection of essays from Scandinavian scholars, the majority of whom could be classified as folklorists (although the contributors run the gamut from journalists to ethnologists, pedagogues to scholars of religion) stems from a series of working groups centered around the discussion of theoretical conceptions of humor and the application of such theoretical models to empirical data. According to Palmenfelt's preface, the late Bengt Holbek — perhaps one of Scandinavia's best folklorists — had a considerable motivating hand in the initiation of these studies. The resulting collection of essays is rewarding, although it suffers somewhat from several shortcomings, the most obvious being its relative inaccessibility to scholars unable to read Scandinavian languages. Nevertheless, some of the essays presented in this collection — particularly those that deal with Scandinavian data — are worthwhile and provide an excellent glimpse into contemporary Scandinavian humor. Indeed, few people connect Scandinavia with humor, given the somewhat gloomy image of the north presented in what little Scandinavian literature and film has made it to large English speaking audiences, and some of these essays help bridge this perceptual gap.

In his introduction, Palmenfelt suggests that the unifying theme of the volume is to examine humor within the cultural context in which such expressions emerge. The point that the study of humor must be contextualized is one well taken, although not particularly new. While Palmenfelt resists the temptation of adhering to a unified or "super theory" of humor, he does suggest that humor researchers would be well served by appealing to aspects of the better known or "large theories" (p. 16). This may be true, but Palmenfelt does not provide a clear method for selecting

theories or deciding which parts of these theories to apply in the ensuing studies. So one is left wondering how exactly this approach is to be carried out. In several of the essays (Palmenfelt; Selmer-Olsen and Søbstad; Akeson), glimpses of such multi-theoretical approaches to the interpretation of specific examples of humor can be found, yet there seems to be little agreement on just which aspects of the "larger theories" are the most useful.

The volume leads off with three articles focusing on theories of humor. Alho centers his discussion on a communication approach to humor and proposes a model comprised of three stereotypical producers of humor: the *lojlige* [laughable] or unwillingly humorous person, the *roliga* [amusing/entertaining] or purposely humorous person, and the *glada* [cheerful] or the good-natured person. While this may be a helpful means for categorizing those who produce humor, it does little to help our understanding of how people come to assume those roles. Knuutila, in an article apparently intended for people unfamiliar with humor theory, provides an overview of many theories of humor, and places his own emphasis on incongruity theories — namely that humor arises at the moment of the recognition of an incongruity. In a commentary to this article, Søbstad offers the critique that not only are not all incongruities humorous but also not all humorous situations depend on incongruity. These first three articles regrettably break little new ground, but are perhaps useful for those Scandinavians looking for a concise overview of several of the major theoretical works in humor.

Hertzberg Johnsen's article, in contrast, because of its specific focus on northern Norway, is an intriguing exploration of situation dependent humor. She illustrates clearly how humor — in this case directed against doctors, politicians, southerners and Swedes — serves as a means for strengthening community as well as establishing distance from a conceptual "Other." In the ensuing article, Gilhus offers an interesting analysis of the link between humor and religion, suggesting that humor, like religion, engages the borders between the physical and the spiritual, the rational and the irrational (p. 18). The article, however, focuses too much on laughter rather than humor, and what could have been an excellent essay ultimately founders.

The following two articles in the volume focus on feminist approaches to humor. Kinnunen provides a competent albeit not terribly exciting overview of general schools of feminist thought (humanistic feminism, gynocentric feminism and postmodern feminism) and suggests modes for the application of these critical approaches to the study of humor.

Johnsen, in her commentary to Kinnunen, applies a feminist approach — albeit not a terribly sophisticated one — to a series of jokes collected primarily using the questionnaire method. Her ultimate conclusion, that there are cultural biases which make it more likely for men than women to tell jokes of a sexual nature, is one that needs further documentation.

Palmenfelt's own contribution to the volume is among the most interesting of all, and his conjectures concerning the humorous in jokes concerning elderly farmers are well argued. Selmer-Olsen and Søbstad provide, in the ensuing article, an interesting overview of the extraordinarily popular "All the children" rhymes. The rhymes, which take the form of: "All the children played on the grass, except for Clementine, she stepped on a mine," took Scandinavia by storm in the mid-1980s much as elephant jokes swept the United States in the 1960s. Selmer-Olsen and Søbstad suggest the rhymes can be read as a form of social critique, proposing that the rhymes express children's experiences of insecurity and the absurd dissolution of norms in society (p. 170). It is regrettable that this article is not easily accessible to a non-Scandinavian audience.

Åkesson's following article on improvised humor and practical jokes is also a worthwhile exploration of the uses of humor as a survival mechanism. Bregenhøj's article on the humor and mumming provides additional material on the growing critical work surrounding festival. Simonsen's investigation of bachelor/bachelorette parties is one of the highlights of the essay collection. Her interviews of participants and analysis of their stories is both competent and engaging. The final article, written by the journalist Ljusterdal, is a fitting humorous close to the volume.

While the volume is generally worthwhile, it seems to be written with a primarily Scandinavian university student audience in mind. While some of the essays contained here have little appeal for most international researchers, several of the articles that deal specifically with Scandinavian phenomena are worthy of wider dissemination. Although one can understand the political motivation of NIF to present the research of these scholars in Scandinavian languages, even short summaries of the articles in English or German would have been a welcome addition to this collection.

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Jean-Louis Barsoux: *Funny Business: Humor, Management and Business Culture*. London: Cassell, 1993. \$16.95.

Although the importance of humor in the workplace was noted as long ago as the 1930s in Elton Mayo's Hawthorne Studies, there are few