Humour, for whom?

Philip Kirby
King’s College London, UK

Abstract
This commentary reflects on the gender politics of the case studies examined in Ben Gerlofs’ excellent article, ‘Deadly Serious: Humor and the Politics of Aesthetic Transgression’. In addition, it considers the innate difficulties of studying an entity (humour) that diverse disciplines have found impossible to completely define.

Keywords
Albur, gender, humour, Mexico, space

Humour is innately spatial. Jokes ‘land’ in different ways in different places. What’s funny in one context is certainly, sometimes dangerously, unfunny in another. Humour is frequently used to strengthen the bonds between members of one group at the expense of another, yet it can also be used to reach across boundaries. Jokes, perhaps especially satire, can be used to ‘speak truth to power’, but they can also function as a kind of authority in and of themselves. Comedy has been, and probably always will be, an important gauge for understanding what ideas and opinions are deemed permissible in a society – or, perhaps more accurately, what proportion of audiences do or do not find something amusing. We’re used to thinking about humour across temporal registers – how certain types of comedy, for example, come in and out of fashion – but scholarly accounts of humour in different spatial registers have arguably been rarer. Ben Gerlofs’ (2022) excellent account of humour and the politics of aesthetic transgression is a notable contribution to geographical accounts of humour. Its application of ethnographic methods to better understand the affective dimensions of humour is especially welcome, bringing spatial accounts of humour, which have often been theoretical, ‘down to earth’.

Indeed, Gerlofs’ account demonstrates that some kinds of humour are so down to earth, they’re very much embodied. In Mexico City, says Gerlofs, ‘[s]ome longstanding elements of the city’s sense of humor have been notoriously shocking to even the most urbane of would-be assimilators, including a minor-key penchant for “gallows humor”, the intimate jocularity of sexualized ribbings and aggressive masculinity games elevated to a form of art, and the baroque peculiarity of the city’s striatic layerings and messy blendings of the divine and profane’. This was an excellent and thought-provoking sentence – with one or two puns itself, I think? – and was, perhaps, a further opportunity to talk more about the gendered politics of humour. It initially brought to mind two things:

Corresponding author:
Philip Kirby, King’s College London, School of Education, Communication and Society, London, UK.
Email: philip.kirby@kcl.ac.uk
first, Christopher Hitchens’ provocative (possibly tongue-in-cheek) suggestion that joking is a primarily male enterprise, honed as a kind of mating pseudo-ritual; and second, Fran Lebowitz’s sardonic reply to Hitchens’ belief that men are ‘funnier’ than women: ‘The cultural values are male; for a woman to say a man is funny is the equivalent of a man saying that a woman is pretty. Also, humor is largely aggressive and pre-emptive, and what’s more male than that?’ (Hitchens, 2012: 391). It’s a quotation that perhaps poses more questions than it answers, and I was hoping Gerlofs’ article might explore these kinds of ideas further – which have been addressed elsewhere in scholarly accounts (e.g. McCann et al., 2010) – especially because the article is so rich in examples of humour’s gendering.

One such example stood out, in particular. The article suggests, at least to my reading, that there is an underlying patriarchal aspect to much humour in Mexico City, notably in the form of the *albur*: ‘the city’s most outstanding contribution to the world of humor … a hypersexual joust of (usually) friendly opponents – traditionally male – that rewards sophistication in double entendre, vulgar phonetic manipulation, and especially spontaneity and performative agility’. Gerlofs quotes Hirsch (1990: 5), who explains that ‘[t]o outwit a friend in these duels of puns, openly exhibiting a familiarity with the vocabulary if not the real thing, is highly regarded. A game played by men and boys, the object is to misunderstand something deliberately, responding not to the intended meaning but to a second, sexual meaning’. There was a suggestion here that the *albur* possesses subversive and transgressive potential, which it clearly does, in the linguistic sense of subverting the primary meaning of an otherwise ‘innocent’ statement. I wondered to what extent the *albur* might also be entwined with a very conventional kind of ‘hyper-masculine’ culture, not exclusive to Mexico City, in which humour is used to obtain a kind of ‘one-upmanship’ over women and/or to police the boundaries between maleness/femaleness and heterosexuality/homosexuality?

To this end, the brief discussion of Lourdes Ruiz Baltazar, ‘colloquially known as ‘La Reina de Albur’ (Queen of Albur)’, seemed an opportunity for further elaboration – and, in particular, her alternative nickname, ‘La Verdolaga Enmascarada’, which was referenced in a footnote, but which seemed a rich enough subject for an article in its own right (perhaps a future one?). Certainly, the biography of Baltazar, ‘a woman playing what is traditionally and still overwhelmingly a men’s game’, might have opened up more questions about the transgressive potential of the *albur*, including further reflection on how, if something is ‘traditional’, it can be subversive at the same time. Are there many traditions that are also subversive? What social function would, or could, a subversive tradition serve?

I was thinking again about some of the gender politics of humour as I read through the later, fascinating examples in the article. In the case of the video productions of Los Supercívicos, an activist comedy group, Gerlofs notes that the boundary between subversion and offense in their humour is subtle, and for some audiences non-existent:

Los Supercívicos traffic in dangerous humor, and this episode ['El Jefe del Defe'] is no exception. That some of the jokes, costumes, representations, and attitudes in this and other of their videos find easy reference to the ugliest variants of superiority theory, and are demeaning and likely otherwise offensive to many, should not be lost in this discussion; as is common in media devoted to ‘public shaming’, Los Supercívicos frequently allow their lesser angels, so to speak, to stray into the enforcement of retrograde aesthetic sensibilities (appeals based in racial/ethnic/gender/sexual stereotypes, for instance). Such gestures commonly lift those ‘in’ on the joke above the social tide while those targeted as the ‘butt’ drown under the punchline.

In this way, the humour of Los Supercívicos seems of a piece with the *albur*. Elsewhere, though, Lidia’s tirade against the actions of the mayor, Miguel Ángel Mancera Espinosa, appears to be less an example of intentional humour than of a woman venting her frustrations about a politician who ‘enjoyed a local reputation for turning his back on civil society and the concerns of everyday residents’. When Lidia sits down, she is angrily
mumbling further insults: she, at least, does not seem amused. Indeed, there seems some understandable ambivalence in the article about whether Lidia’s actions were amusing or not: ‘Lidia’s brazen vulgarity was, as an obvious signal of a humorous gesture in this context, falling squarely within the remit of the longstanding traditions of Mexican and chilango humor outlined above. Still, not everyone found Lidia’s performance funny’. Certainly, if this was humour, it did not seem of the same type as the examples described above. I also wondered how the claim that Lidia’s tirade was ‘an obvious signal of a humorous gesture’ sat with the later claim of ‘humor’s profound ambiguity’?

For sure, humour can be difficult to pin down, which returns us to the idea of humour’s situatedness, and, indeed, to the elephant in the room – an elephant that is probably present in all studies of humour, whether geographical or otherwise: what, in fact, is humour? Gerlofs highlights the famous tripartite typology of humour, as discussed by Michael Billig: “superiority” (wherein social hierarchies provide levity at the expense of others), “incongruity” (which relies on departures from the expected), and “release” (elsewhere called “relief”, whereby humor can be used to deflect or otherwise navigate difficult emotions and situations, or to alleviate a variety of pressures). Gerlofs is rightly, I think, a little impatient with this typology, ‘given the shades of meaning and palimpsestic layerings that often attend even the most seemingly straightforward of jokes’. Indeed, a recent review in psychology claims that, while humour derives principally from incongruity, it contains a (benign) dash of superiority, too: ‘After 2.5 millennia of philosophical deliberation and psychological examination [!], most scholars have concluded that humor arises from incongruity … We suggest revising incongruity theory by proposing that humor arises from a benign violation: something that threatens a person’s well-being, identity, or normative belief structure but that simultaneously seems okay’ (Warren and McGraw, 2016: 407).

Warren and McGraw’s definition gets at the fact that a joke can be funny to some, but not to others. In that sense, it explains the reactions to, for example, Lidia’s joke: ‘not everyone found Lidia’s performance funny, and I consider it as likely as not that for a few vecinos [neighbors], this didn’t necessarily register as humor. Others certainly did find it funny, and the laughter and (admittedly rather chaotic) levity elicited by her diatribe represent a measure of success in simultaneously producing several distinct effects’. In this case, it may have been the willingness of Lidia to step outside the norms of political discourse, by employing a diatribe, which elicited the (nervous?) giggles of some in the audience, but that represented an unfunny breach of protocol for others. Warren and McGraw’s definition might also help to explain the example of the albur, a joke that potentially challenges the (usually) male teller’s beliefs about their or others’ sexual identity, but that ultimately ‘seems ok’ – that challenges gender and sexual norms, then, but not too much to actually change them. Again, we come back to questions that have no definitive answers: is humour – or, at least, most humour – transgressive, or does it mainly serve to perpetuate a status quo?

If we turn to a common case study for humour studies, the political sphere, and to the (admittedly anecdotal) actions of politicians especially, the evidence would seem mixed. Humour is used to disparage and mock politicians, but it is not always clear what effects this has, if any. Donald Trump famously despises being laughed at, reserving especial opprobrium for his impersonation by Alec Baldwin on Saturday Night Live. Boris Johnson, on the other hand, has arguably made a career out of being laughed at – and at laughing at himself, which is something Trump rarely, if ever, does. Again, there’s research in psychology about humour, self-deprecation, and sexuality that might be interesting to think about in relation to this, and in regard to the albur. Greengross and Miller (2008: 393), in a study of college students, found that ‘[h]umor type and presenter status had no effects on short-term attractiveness, but self-deprecating humor by high-status presenters (but not low-status presenters) increased long-term attractiveness for both sexes’. In other words, it might be amusing to self-deprecate when you’re successful, but less so when this self-deprecation reinforces negative beliefs that some
may hold about you. Whether this works the same way for men and women would be an interesting question to explore further.

These questions, though, are perhaps for another time. And none of them should detract from what is a worthy and important addition to geographical accounts of humour. The strengths of Gerlofs’ account, as I hope this short commentary has made clear, are the writing, the novelty (for geographical accounts of humour) of the case study, and the rich, ethnographic approach. The comments here are requests for further research in this area and/or highlight the fact, even after two and a half millennia, as Warren and McGraw note, we’re still debating this funny thing called humour.

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**ORCID iD**

Philip Kirby https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9254-8732

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