



Book Review – *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy*, by L. Mizejewski and V. Sturtevant (eds).

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. 472 pp. €30.75

Marija Laugalyte

Department of German / Department of Digital Humanities, UCC

Edited by Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy* (2017) comes at a time in which tired and degrading stereotypes of women are still pervasive, but also at a time in which the feminism which criticises such is not only a legitimate discourse but a popular one (p. viii–ix). It is, likewise, a time in which “the female comedy auteur is increasingly visible but still a minority in a male-dominated field” (p. 27). The title, *Hysterical!*, exemplifies this double-edged moment. On the one hand, it reiterates the pathologisation of women’s expression and the refusal to stay silent. On the other hand, the authors repurpose the word so as to break through the silencing of women’s voices and to move towards a frank discussion of their embodied experiences that are so often shrouded in myths (p. 2).

Though not exhaustive, *Hysterical!* expands on and updates feminist scholarship on female comedians, starting with the silent film era and ending with comedian-authored television series, often including descriptions of their origin stories and the development of their careers. The book includes discussions of comedians that are already widely written about, such as Roseanne Barr and Mae West, but also adds analyses of less studied comedy pioneers such as Fay Tincher, Fanny Brice and Carol Burnett. In this way, the collection aims to eliminate the widespread amnesia around women comics which lead to assertions such as that of Christopher Hitchen’s in *Vanity Fair*, who proclaimed to know in 2007 “Why Women Aren’t Funny”. It also critically celebrates present-day comedians and their negotiations of feminist discourses.

Structured chronologically, the beginning chapters start with silent film era comedians. Kristine Brunovska Karnick’s and Joanna E. Rapf’s chapters look at Mabel Nomand and Fey Tincher respectively, examining how these comedians straddled changing popular conceptions of femininity. At this time, the New Woman image, based on the suffragette movement, class struggle and an interest in sports and physical activity, was being replaced

by new ideas of femininity tied to the ‘Modern Woman’. This new “pleasure-seeking, consumerist ideal” (p. 36), hinging on a growing commodity culture and culminating in the figure of the Jazz Age flapper, emphasised “wealth, fun, and adventure” (p. 36) and actresses who began to embody this ideal embraced a new chic fashion and the short bob haircut. Feminism was no longer about voting and education for this new brand of femininity, but about consumerist behaviours. Both authors observe that even though films featuring the new femininity of the Modern Woman were becoming generally more popular, where Normand and Tincher were concerned, contemporary audiences preferred to see them in more physically demanding comic roles aligned with the energetic spirit of the New Woman. The draw towards these individual New Woman stars was not enough, however, to counteract the more general popularity of new, more physically passive images of femininity bound to the rise of the beauty culture that was a prominent part of the new commodity landscape. Karnick and Rapf contribute the decline of both comedians to this and to the increase in narrative-based feature-length comedies that, aligning with middle-class tastes, were seen to be creating a more respectable name for Hollywood, unlike the slapstick one/two-reel short films that Normand and Tincher starred in.

Many of the chapters focus on the female comedian as an outsider figure. Bambi Haggins’ considers how Moms Mabley set the scene for Wanda Sykes, observing the intersectional identities both comedians operate from—black, female and gay—and how both “speak truth to power” (p. 207) as they reveal and educate about how racism inflects their lives. In the chapter on Margaret Cho, Rebecca Krefting tracks the comedian’s career that began in television and stand up, allowing her access to a mainstream audience and enabling her to earn a living and make enough money to, later in her career, target a more marginalised audience and move her output into more niche mediums such as books, screenplays, blogs and podcasts. This allowed Cho to become more daring in her ‘charged’ humour aimed at inspiring political action and uniting marginalised identities into a community. Krefting argues that Cho’s embodiment of the outsider figure creates a safe comedy space where marginalised people, who are often the butt of the joke, feel a sense of belonging.

Chapters on comedians authoring contemporary television series in the 21st century, as well as how these authors relate to discourses of feminism in mainstream media, include discussions of Tina Fey and Lena Dunham. Julia Havas looks at how Tina Fey rejects any clear alignment with feminism while focusing on critiquing gender relations through her authorship and performance. In contrast, Maria Sulimma looks at how Lena Dunham firmly identifies herself as a feminist but is summarily criticised and policed because of this identification. Havas notes that, though Fey has been celebrated as a feminist writer and

performer, her grotesque bodily performances as the character Liz Lemon in later seasons of *30 Rock* (2006–2013) led to a backlash in which her feminism began to be questioned. Ironically, this was due to her not fitting expectations of restrained feminine behaviour, which exposed the limited understandings of feminism in mainstream media. Additionally, Fey's proclivity to question sexism as well as feminism further positions her as a nuanced comedian that the media struggles to pin down. Sulimma, writing about Lena Dunham, focuses on how Dunham's series *Girls* (2012–2017) is a text which is received by audiences through a filter of the paratexts that makes up Dunham's star persona: principally interviews, podcasts, her book and her social media presence. These paratexts have muddled the text and the creator, spurring audiences' harsh criticism of *Girls* on feminist grounds (though Dunham never claims the show to be feminist) which has been incorporated into Dunham's star text as the unruly feminist girl that gets things wrong. Thus, Sulimma makes the novel argument that Dunham's comedy does not only include what she produces but also how she is received by audiences.

On the whole, *Hysterical!* is an insightful collection on these female comedians and includes further work on Lucille Ball, Lily Tomlin, Whoopi Goldberg, Ellen DeGeneres and Sarah Silverman. The introduction includes a comprehensive history of the main works and theories of feminist studies of comedy and the early chapters usefully indicate where one can easily find rarer footage of 20th century female comedians' work online. Unfortunately, though some chapters cover comedian's engagement online, the collection does not look at women comedians whose fame was founded and exists primarily on platforms such as YouTube (for example, Jenna Marbles). This platform and its stars will need to be explored in any subsequent collections to reflect the expanding channels through which women enter comedy. In addition, it does not include any discussions of trans women comedians, such as Patti Harrison, which would also necessitate an expansion of the introductory material that rests on the female body as the origin of women's exclusion from comedy. Nevertheless, *Hysterical!* is and will be of benefit to any scholar studying women and humour and especially for star studies scholars that focus on funny women.

Marija Laugalyte is a final-year Ph.D. candidate with particular interests in television, the representation of gender and technology. Based in University College Cork, her research focuses on contemporary US television's representation of working women in relation to technological changes of the 21st century. She holds a master's degree in Film Studies and a B.A. in English and French.

Works Cited

Hitchens, C., 2007. Why Women Aren't Funny. *Vanity Fair*, [online] January. Available at: < <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701> > [Accessed 16 Nov. 2018].

Mizejewski, L. and Sturtevant, V. eds., 2017. *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy*. Austin: University of Texas Press.