
**Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff
(eds), Humor, Entertainment and Popular Culture
During World War I**

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Publisher
AFEA

Electronic version

URL: <http://transatlantica.revues.org/7703>

ISSN: 1765-2766

Electronic reference

Trevor Harris, « Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff (eds), *Humor, Entertainment and Popular Culture During World War I* », *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2015, Online since 01 June 2016, connection on 05 October 2016. URL : <http://transatlantica.revues.org/7703>

This text was automatically generated on 5 octobre 2016.



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REFERENCES

THOLAS-DISSET, Clémentine and Karen A. RITZENHOFF (eds), *Humor, Entertainment and Popular Culture During World War I*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 288 pages, ISBN 978-1-137-44909-2, hardback \$ 95, 86,15 €, £ 60.00

- 1 This well presented, and well illustrated, volume takes up the challenge of placing the horror and devastation of the Great War in the context of the light-hearted responses to it. The potential grotesque at the heart of such a juxtaposition—*gueules cassées* setting out to *se fendre la pipe*—brings into focus both the role of humor as propaganda and the absolute necessity for a powerful, re-humanizing strategy among those close, and closest, to the carnage. This is a bold move on the editors' part since, as Karen Randell reminds us in the Preface, the way we invariably approach the Great War “is solemn, respectful, and most certainly humorless” (xii). Strange, since humor, after all, is often the spontaneous accompaniment to otherwise morbid occasions. This book seeks to allow the fun and the laughs back into the discussion and push to one side the cliché of universally shell-shocked Tommies, or the definitive destruction of pre-war sensibility and its replacement by a world-encompassing waste land: in short, to challenge a presentation of 1914-18 as pure discontinuity. While no one denies the “unspeakable” horror of that conflict, one way in which unspeakable horror was articulated was through humor, however black or bleak: in spite of everything, many people managed to cope.

- 2 The book brings together contributions from academics based in Australia, Britain, France, Holland, Italy, and the United States. The sixteen short, sharp essays (but all devote ample space to notes and bibliographical information) are divided into four sections which deal in turn with: “Laughter, Diversion and Nationhood in Great War Films”; “Novels, Newspapers and Illustrations”; “Entertaining on Stage”; “Promoting War Values”. As with any collection of essays, some fit more snugly into their allotted space than others, and some are more readable, more convincing than others. But the editors should be congratulated on bringing together such a wide range of material which deals with reactions at the front, but also in all the main warring powers.
- 3 In the first section of the book (“Laughter, Diversion and Nationhood in Great War Films”), the unifying thread is possibly best summed up in what Giaime Alonge and Francesco Pitassio, in their study of the film *Maciste Alpino* (1916), call “body culture and national politics” (53), as governments in the countries at war strove to consolidate the idea of the nation and (re-)generate national energy. This policy was applied in the trenches; but also on the home front, where Hollywood war films, for example, were not afraid to promote the war through what Fabrice Lyczba calls “ballyhoo stunts” (59) and “excessive theatricality” (66). Lyczba’s argument is that this entertaining approach, by allowing the audience to participate in a carefully marketed multimedia version of the war, developed the American public’s “hoax-debunking skills” (69): though whether the entertainments thus conceived made the audience’s aesthetic discrimination more sophisticated or merely kept them in the dark about what was actually going on in Europe is a moot point. Precisely what did audiences take away from these performances? What meanings did they create? Clémentine Tholas-Disset looks at similar uncertainties in the relationship between Hollywood and the official stance on the war, indicating that audiences were not necessarily as streetwise as one might think.
- 4 Part II (“A War of Witty Words and Images”) opens with a piece in which Jakub Kazecki underlines comedy as mockery in Walter Bloem’s war memoir, *Vormarsch* (1916). Bloem’s writing produces a relatively state-subservient text in which “the aggressive and chauvinistic elements of humor [bring] *Vormarsch* very close to the German propaganda images of the time” (99). Koenraad Du Pont’s account of the “Nature and Functions of Humor in Trench Newspapers” underlines, by contrast, the free-ranging content of the newspapers produced—in their hundreds—during the conflict, as well as the variety of types of humor they included: the latter, however, being used more often than not as a safety valve rather than as the articulation of rebellion against authority. Renée Dickason, who looks both at humor in the front line and at home in Britain, also underlines the “uncontroversial” (130), conformist approach adopted in *Mr. Punch’s History of the Great War* (1919). *Punch* tends to toe the Establishment line, peddling an image of a Britain which sees itself as superior, firmly in the “moral ascendancy” (127), and which feels comfortable with derision, denigration and demonization where the “Teuton” is concerned. Even the class and gender divisions of pre-war Britain still seem firmly in place, as they do in the “World War I *Bande Dessinée*” (Anne Cirella-Urrutia), with the mobilization of French children capable of operating “as the subject and the object of propaganda discourses” (137). Indeed, total war affects all sections of the population. Children were thus used as both the motivator and justification of the conflict, with Bécassine being portrayed as France’s national heroine, part of a “psychological strategy to reunite all regions of France and the colonies” (141). Another female figure is pressed

into service in “Marianne in the Trenches” (Laurent Bihl), where we are shown how the personification of the French Republic fulfills a complex diversity of national roles.

- 5 The third part of the book is devoted to stage entertainment. Felicia Hardison Londré leads us deep into the atmosphere of the work done by the United States’ “Over There Theatre League”, and the rapport between the theatre’s performers and the young American “doughboys” in France. Although it was anything but a joy ride for the actors—who performed on (at best) makeshift stages and whose average day was exhausting, and run with military precision—, a clear sense of fun emerges: both among the audiences and among the performers themselves. This is a therapeutic, escapist laughter also explored by John Mullen (“Humor and Symbolic Empowerment in Music Hall Song”), the largely working-class audiences eschewing propaganda or strategic German-bashing, and instead bating their own government or indulging in songs based around a risqué or bawdy theme, or just singing along to a comic tongue-twister. The working-class audience may often have given vent to the prejudices of the day, in the music hall they nonetheless found their own voice. Jenna L. Kubly’s piece on J.M. Barrie’s *Echoes of the War* (four one-act wartime plays brought together for publication in 1920) is more preoccupied with middle-class attitudes to war, which tend to focus on the disillusionment, even the sentimentalism engendered by the conflict.

- 6 Class-based reactions to the war also permeate the last section of the book. Amy Wells looks at “culinary activism” on the American home front, where wartime sugar shortages served as a pretext for the government to encourage willing patriotic middle-class cooperation in the war effort. Women, particularly, by signing a “conservation pledge”, were incited to help win the war by enforcing frugality in the home: another form of quasi-enlistment for a non-combatant section of the population. Robert Crawford (“Chunder Goes Forth”) investigates the “intersection of humor, commercial interests, and national sentiment” (226) in Australian wartime advertizing. A highly racialized Australian identity is conveyed through the character of “Chunder Loo” used in “Cobra” boot polish advertisements. But in spite of himself, or rather in spite of his Australian creators, as we follow him through the war, Chunder accedes to Australianness, even as Cobra successfully build their commercial brand. T. Adrian Lewis (“Mobilizing morale”) then picks his way through William Stevenson’s *At the Front in a Flivver* (1917), the memoir of an American *ambulancier* whose matter-of-fact narrative conveys the absurdity and the horror of war. Its bleak humor functions often through an apparent empathy disconnect, as Stevenson plots the gruesome paradox of dynamic, able-bodied medics rushing around the Western Front collecting the corpses and mutilated men churned out by a static war. Karen A. Ritzenhoff closes the collection with an “illustration of the idiosyncrasies of American society at the time of the conflict and of the changing role of women instigated by the war” (266).

- 7 In common with their World War II counterparts who “kept calm and carried on”, many of those caught up in the Great War did their best to place sandbags of quotidian ordinariness in the path of on-rushing terror: how else was one to maintain some sense of human agency in view of the hyper-mechanized logic of war? Humor was a cornerstone of this strategy to distill a few drops of normalcy from all the madness and had a number of serious objectives. The fun was often pedagogic, transforming “the war into a humorous tale to make it more palatable and accessible” (79) to the civilians far from the front. But bending the populace to the tasks of war and to the government’s purpose could never control all the laughs. Several contributors, inevitably, find themselves

alluding to Bergson. But his view of humor as “the mechanical in the human” is here turned on its head, since the argument of much of the book is precisely that what we witness during the war is something irrepressibly human in something mechanical. Some observers of wartime humor will perhaps be tempted to see the laughter and entertainment as so many manifestations of *panem et circenses*. But the agency of soldiers, and others, cannot be so easily spirited away: who, for example, retained sufficient wherewithal—writing in *The Wipers Times*—, to encourage “platoon commanders to ask themselves the question ‘Am I as offensive as I might be’” (109)? Just a wisecrack perhaps, but a crack through which leaps a comic spark of wisdom: as the military equivalent of middle management, junior officers were bound to displease. True, the young lieutenants were probably not all dupes, and neither, clearly, were the non-commissioned ranks beneath them.

- 8 There are limits to what is achievable within a single volume: taking on humor, entertainment and popular culture is ambitious to say the least. Not surprisingly, there are criticisms which might be made: it is a shame, for example, that no historian or colleague currently working in cultural studies in Germany (or Austria) is among the contributors. Some of the English in the book is a little shaky and there are a number of typos (xiii, 41, 67, 81, 83, 84, 92, 114, 135...). But dwelling on the quibbles would not be much fun, or fair. This is a book which, in the end—by the end—has accumulated a momentum which throws Lawrence Napper’s argument in the opening essay into much sharper relief: total war did indeed have its epoch-altering properties. But the confusion, the cock-ups, the mud and the mess, all lent themselves to comic treatment and cried out, come what may, to be sent up, kept at a distance. Creating any sense of perspective when one is so completely up against a wall of monstrosity was bound to test even the most resilient souls. But quite a few somehow managed it, whether retaining their phlegm or by way of slapstick, and tried to make sense of it all using the language available to them: for this, too, we owe them our thanks.
- 9 The interpretation of World War I as replacing one civilization with another will likely not be shifted easily: the ownership of this part of our communal past will continue to be contested. Although it would be over-stating the case, therefore, to say that *Humor, Entertainment and Popular Culture* gives us sufficient purchase to prize the Great War out of modernist hands and make a case for a degree of cultural continuity after 1918, the book certainly asks some important questions. There is the war that has been passed down to us, but an important aspect of the war that actually happened is reinstated here.

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