

---

Rae Beth Gordon. *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001. 274p.

HELYNNE HOLLSTEIN HANSEN  
WESTERN STATE COLLEGE OF COLORADO

French comic traditions between 1870 and 1910, which combined the tendency toward hysteria with epileptic, slapstick, and other forms of rather unsophisticated and bizarre forms of body movement and humor, make the national taste in entertainment a natural for the likes of Jerry Lewis. However, this meticulous historical study of these “hysterical and epileptic” tendencies in French *café-concert* or cabaret scene of the late 19th century and the first films of the early 20th century does not address the comparison with Jerry Lewis comedy until the epilogue. The six principal chapters provide a detailed description of the philosophical views of literature, art, and music in the 19th century that led to a kind of entertainment that appealed to the “low” element in human nature.

Professors of French literature will find in Rae Beth Gordon’s study interesting references to numerous 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelists who wrote of, and thus perpetuated, the fascination of the French public with outrageous and grotesque traits of movement and hysteria. Baudelaire once wrote that “laughter is the privileged dictum of madman,” and Flaubert, Maupassant, the Goncourt brothers, Huysmans, and Jarry all included the spectacle of hysteria in their novels. Colette, who actively participated in the *café-concert* and music hall circuit of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century France also commented on the association of the performances of the day with pathology. The author points out the popularity in French society of “slumming it” in dives and sordid bars as well as the proliferation of realist and naturalist literature and theater where themes of alcoholism, crime, and prostitution abounded (84).

Gordon’s first chapter delves into the relationship between the diagnosis of hysteria in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical practice and theory and performance art found in Parisian cabaret, early film comedy, puppet shows, pantomime, side shows, circus exhibitions, etc., leading up to the Surrealist pronouncement that “hysteria was the greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth century” (2).

The book’s cover features a poster of Eugénie Fougère, one of many “epileptic singers,” whose success in the Parisian cabaret scene testified to the fascination of the public with convulsive body language, which encouraged audiences to see a correlation between idiocy, hysteria, loss and control ... *and* laughter (64) during the years 1870-95.

---

The book also contains numerous black-and-white photos and publicity posters that show various comedians demonstrating the kinds of facial grimaces and contortions, and bizarre bodily movements such as animality, automata, and epilepsy that spectators loved. The author explains that such anomalies were popular partly because they evoked laughter and partly because of the sense of superiority that the sight of the afflicted offered them. Also, the “degenerate” tastes of the intellectual and artistic elite tended to pain and other intense sensations meant to “stimulate a lethargic and decadent psyche” (96).

Such tendencies of the audience, though, are not necessarily a negative phenomenon, Gordon notes, stating that seemingly decadent forms of entertainment “convey a release and excess of energy and afford a sensation of liberation . . . from layers of inhibition that social convention and taboos place against total bodily abandon, as well as rejections of images or illness, deformity and ugliness . . . a liberation not only of the body, but one of the mind, and senses” (111-112).

Likewise, as the first French filmmakers began to imitate such motions and themes on celluloid by about 1900, “every movement within the frame and through montage is composed with the aim of producing a visceral internal reaction in the spectator” (139). Filmmakers, in fact, were thought to have traits in common with illusionists and magicians due to their exploration of the unconscious (149). Interestingly, the author notes that film screenings in French are still called *séances*, meaning a seating or show time, but still carrying the echo of a spiritual *séance* (41). She quotes Jean Cocteau, best-known for his production of the innovative film *La Belle et la Bête*, who believed that the motion picture audience makes the tables turn “and speak by secret means since the words [attributed to tables at *séances*] come from the darkness within us” (198).

It is hardly surprising, then, says Gordon, to see a parallel in comic taste in early French film not just with Jerry Lewis movies but also with more contemporary American products such as *Beavis and Butthead* and *Dumb and Dumber*, which, frankly, are signs of the lower faculties—the body in its various pathologies dominating reason. “Film is an *excess*,” Gordon states. “[It is] an excess of movement, internal and external, an excess of images rapidly flitting by or superimposed, an excess of emotions experienced and overlaid with those of our own life” (190).

The obsession in both cabaret and film with such excess as well as with the Double—the division between consciousness and corporeal unconscious—is what links French entertainment particularly with the works of Lewis. A half a century after the advent of film, a new generation of French audiences rediscovered this “vein of humor pushed to painful and idiotic corporeal extremes in the person of Jerry Lewis” (202). Gordon cites such Lewis films as *The Caddy* (1959), *The Bell-*

---

*boy* (1960), *The Nutty Professor* (1962) as overt homages to early French silent films.

Although Lewis, according to French film critic Jean-Pierre Coursodon, “represented the lowest degree of physical, moral and intellectual debasement that a comic actor can reach” (205), the French public was delighted with this American comic who was not afraid to take on the outrageous and grotesque traits of the first strain of French film comics—gags based on physical pain, a comic style that is thematically torturous, and the land of the absurd (209). Despite Coursodon’s assessment of Lewis’ talent, the American comic was “both genuinely popular and critically respected in France” (205). New wave director Jean-Luc Godard was particularly impressed with and influenced by Lewis.

During a trip to France in 1965, Lewis was greeted “with a rock star’s welcome” at Orly Airport. He returned to France in 1983, the same year that his *The King of Comedy* was called “sublime” in Cannes. On March 24, 1984, Lewis was awarded the Légion d’Honneur by the French government.

Although not every reader of Gordon’s study may agree that Lewis, whose comic style is often regarded in his own country as embarrassingly over the top, was worthy of such a lofty honor from the French government, this book is a fascinating read. Students of 19<sup>th</sup>- or 20<sup>th</sup>-century French literature and history will also find that this book offers an interesting and heretofore little explored dimension to their *connaissance* of the French character and personality of the period. ✱