

Book review

## Deep inside and far beyond stand-up comedy

Lindfors, Antti. 2019. *Intimately Allegorical: The Poetics of Self-Mediation in Stand-Up Comedy*. Turun yliopiston julkaisu – Annales universitatis Turkuensis. Sarja - ser. B osa - tom. 478. Turku: Humaniora Turku. 122 pages + 4 articles. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-7651-5>

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The dissertation contributes to the emerging interest in stand-up comedy within folklore scholarship (see, for example, Brodie 2008, 2014; Gunnell 2014). The work has a clear structure, each chapter and each article (as well as the entire thesis) begin with well-articulated research questions, which are meticulously elaborated on throughout the text, and the outcomes are succinctly summarized in the conclusions.

The author skillfully integrates the rigorous analysis of empirical data with more general theoretical postulates about stand-up comedy. While most of the dissertation comprises of extratemporal conclusions, it also includes a flashback into the development of stand-up and uncovers its roots (see Lindfors 2019, Chapter 3). This historical information provides valuable context for understanding the theoretical implications of the dissertation, especially the aspects of narrativity, self-reflexivity and spontaneity that are among the focal points of the research.

### **Problematizing and conceptualizing stand-up comedy**

The dissertation employs a complex approach to the phenomenon of stand-up comedy and explores it from multiple angles. Antti Lindfors unites all the aspects outlined in the thesis into three main perspectives: textuality (stand-up routines as metadiscursive units of expression), reflexivity (the analysis of metacommunication and ideological values behind stand-up routines), and relatability (economy of attention and affective arrangements that lie in the core of stand up) (p. 5). The dissertation also reveals and discusses some of the contradictions that are embedded in the genre of stand-up comedy, such as, for example, the clash between originality and repetition, the necessity to represent the private selves and simultaneously act as a public typified persona. An important conceptual category that deals with this (from the first glance, contradictory alignment) is the one of a stage persona. Lindfors integrates the analysis of stand-up comedians' reflections on their stage personae



(or the absence thereof) and the data collected via participant observation and watching stand-up comedy recordings. He thus asserts that adopting a stage persona is a comedian's way to balance "between personation and impersonation, or concealment and revelation" (p. 68) and thus appropriate other people's perspective on oneself (p. 70).

Building on such a focus of self-mediation, the author approaches the genre of stand-up as "a continuum between performance of self on the one hand and animation of voice on the other hand" (p. 21, see also p. 36, pp. 72–75). He also argues that "a fundamental trope of the genre [of stand-up comedy] is constituted by playful thematization, staging, and reappropriation of such ideals and mediations" (p. 31) thus challenging the notions of immediacy and the lack of mediation (cf. Auslander's [1997, 119] description of stand-up performance). Lindfors also explores the "routinization of experience", i.e. the mechanisms of transformation of personal experiences into stand-up routines (Chapter 5.1). By outlining complex relations between a stand-up comic, her routines and her audience, Lindfors uncovers the multimodality and multilayeredness of the genre and the importance of adopting a holistic perspective on it.

A crucial part of the thesis explores stand-up as an embodied practice (Article IV). Lindfors focuses on the role of gestures in stand-up performances and discusses how comedians use them to manage the navigation between different layers of performance (i.e. various realms of storyworld and here-and-now space). However, this aspect of stand-up performance is not isolated from previously discussed characteristics of the genre; the author demonstrates the relations between gestures, individuality and authenticity of self-presentation.

### **Beyond the disciplinary boundaries and research object**

Lindfors uses methods of different disciplines in his dissertation; his primary theoretical frameworks are folklore studies, linguistic anthropology and cultural studies, but he also skillfully adopts methodological tools of semiotics, philosophy, humour studies and other academic disciplines. Some of the key concepts in the research (e.g., poetics, parallelism etc.) are employed by different academic disciplines in different ways (see p. 26 on the discussion of poetics, pp. 84-90 and Article III on the discussion of parallelism). However, Lindfors integrates these multiple perspectives in his work and demonstrates how the synthesis of these perspectives can shed light onto stand-up comedy.

Coincidentally, the applications of his work go far beyond stand-up research; the author himself suggests that "stand-up presents the researcher with a productively multifaceted and resistant object against which to calibrate and hone one's theoretical premises and methodological tools" (p. 23). By regarding "stand-up comedy as a phenomenon through which to study various aspects of contemporary culture and communication" (p. 40) Lindfors contributes significantly to the conceptual apparatus that is used in a variety of disciplines. For example, in Article II he argues for a broader understanding of the concept of satire as not only a literary genre but also a communicative device. The author also points at the link between this broader trope of satire and ethics (p. 144), which received relatively minor attention from scholars compared, for instance, to the relations between humour and ethics (e.g. Morreall 1986; Gaut 1998). The focus on the intersection between satire and ethics opens up curious possibilities for calibrating these concepts within communicative studies, philosophy and other disciplines. Similarly, the insights that derive from the analysis of



stand-up comedians' stage personae can be extrapolated on the broader category of "public personae in contemporary culture" (p. 75) enriching our understanding of this complex phenomenon that penetrates through diverse spheres of life from politics to show business and personal branding.

The author also suggests that studying stand-up comedy can endorse the understanding of some aspects of our everyday communication, namely its "performative, formal, or artificial nature" (p. 63). Such a suggestion represents an interesting commentary on generic fuzziness, which in turn draws attention to the fact that the border between staged performances and everyday interaction is not always clear-cut (see also Goffman 1959; Hopper 1993).

### Taking a closer look at the audience

Lindfors also addresses the issue of the role of audience in stand-up comedy by asserting that "audience involvement is both encouraged and constrained onto a narrow repertoire of appropriately placed, largely non-referential indexical responses" (p. 52, see also p. 127). Moreover, the author introduces the category of attention (which in itself presupposes political and social implications) in order to reflect on the *affective arrangements* of stand-up performances (Chapters 4, 5, Article I). The audience is thus regarded as instrumental to a comedian's self-presentation and the connection with it is a necessary precondition for a successful performance, but a detailed analysis of the audience agency lies beyond the scope of the thesis. In this respect, even though the dissertation already explores the genre of stand-up comedy by employing different sets of data, an interesting direction of the future research will be to look at stand-up from the other side, namely, study the audience reception. Guided by the understanding of self-mediation techniques in stand-up that are analysed in the present thesis, the research of stand-up appreciation based on the fieldwork among the audience can add an extra dimension to stand-up research.

### Concluding remarks

In the world where stand-up comedy is becoming increasingly popular its critical analysis is indispensable for understanding the mechanisms of functioning of contemporary culture. Antti Lindfors's dissertation penetrates into deep layers of this genre while simultaneously suggesting starting points for a lot of curious 'sidelines' of research in different areas. The interdisciplinary nature of the dissertation alongside with the engaging empirical material that is analysed by the author make this research work a must-read for the scholars whose research interests lie in the fields of folklore studies, linguistic anthropology, cultural studies, semiotics and other disciplines.

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