Book Review

David Humphrey. 2023. *The Time of Laughter: Comedy and the Media Cultures of Japan*. 304 p. University of Michigan Press. ISBN: 9780472076185. $85.00.

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David Humphrey's *The Time of Laughter: Comedy and the Media Cultures of Japan* is an important study that addresses a notable gap in the scholarship of Japanese comedy and humor. Previous works by scholars like Howard Hibbett in *The Chrysanthemum and the Fish* and Joel Cohn in *Studies in the Comic Spirit in Modern Japanese Fiction* have explored Japanese humor within literature, and several monographs by Morioka, Sasaki, Brau, and McArthur have examined the performance genre of rakugo. And while some chapters of *Understanding Humor in Japan* (by Jessica Davies) touched upon different comedy genres, no English-language books have yet paid wider attention to the relationship of performance and broadcast media. Here, Humphrey's book is distinctive in its focus on post-war Japanese comedy and its reciprocal relationship with post-war media, most prominently television.

The book title introduces two of the key aspects of Humphrey's approach: both "time" and "laughter" function as leitmotifs throughout the book. "Time" primarily refers to the changing historical context of comedy in post-war Japan. Humphrey traces the emergence of television and television comedy in the 1950s and 1960s, Japan's increasing wealth, the boom of the bubble economy in the 1980s accompanied by exuberant festival-like comedy, followed by a period of economic stagnation and more subdued comedy in the 1990s. Finally, Humphrey brings us up to date by considering the impact of new media in the early 21st century.

Humphrey skillfully demonstrates how comedy in different decades relates to its wider historical and societal context, while also paying attention to specific professional and critical discourses about Japanese media. He is interested in the role of media, and specifically of television, in more general terms, and how that then filters through to comedy: for example, how does a shared understanding of viewing habits influence the way comedy productions are designed and edited? If it is assumed that television is background noise, how does this play out in the production of comedy programs? This vein of inquiry also draws out how comedy can, in responding to certain beliefs about its audiences, reinforce societal norms and anxieties. For example, the expectation that the audience is largely female might lead to particular choices about how to best capture the studio audience reaction, which then transmits

that expectation back to viewers. His analysis is particularly insightful when dealing with Japanese sources, integrating them seamlessly into his critiques.

"Laughter," the second analytical pillar, refers most notably to the audible laughter of comedy audiences, both in the studio and at home. Humphrey discusses the interaction between private and public laughter from a theoretical perspective, while concretely demonstrating how television's treatment of audible laughter changed and developed through the 20th century. He also draws interesting connections to aspects of gender, outlining the contradiction of mostly female comedy audiences (and therefore mostly female voices) emitting the laughter in response to a comedy that was predominantly produced and performed by men, situated in a wider discourse where misogyny was prevalent.

The analytical pillars of "time" and "laughter" remain connected throughout the book. Time does, as discussed, indeed refer to the historical moment in which a particular phenomenon or discourse arises, but Humphrey also examines time at the micro-level: timing and rhythm of comedic performance and reaction, be it audible audience laughter or media-specific framing such as a change in camera angle or the emergence of on-screen text. The timing and pacing of these aspects are key to the way in which they might complement or replace other performative aspects of comedy. One of the strengths of Humphrey's analysis is how convincingly he draws connections not only between these different techniques but also between the different decades. He demonstrates how a development of both comedy content and perception is taking place and to some extent why, while also emphasizing the role of continuity and gradual evolution. He shows clearly how certain aspects of comedy continue to be influenced by their predecessors, and how novelty is often not quite as new as it is presented in the media.

Humphrey's examples are well-chosen throughout, especially for readers with a potentially limited engagement with Japanese comedy. Some of the examples might even be known to readers with only a cursory awareness of Japanese comedy, and the book enables such readers to understand these examples in a wider context. For example, the manzai stand-up comedy of Beat Takeshi, which is analyzed in chapter 3 in the discussion of the manzai boom of the early 1980s, might be new to some, but Beat Takeshi himself continues to be a familiar face in Japan and abroad, not least through his career as a film auteur using his real name Takeshi Kitano. An example from the 1990s program *Susume! Denpa Shōnen*, which is addressed in Humphrey's analysis of "comedy documentary," has recently achieved some media attention in English: the HBO documentary film *The Contestant* (2023, Dir.: Clair Titley) tells the story of comedian Nasubi's appearance on the show, where he was placed naked and alone in an apartment, left to his own devices, and relied on writing postcards to win food in sweepstakes for more than a year. One of the examples of "one-hit wonder" comedians discussed in Humphrey's last chapters is Pikotaro, whose comedic song

about apples, pens, and pineapples went viral after being posted on YouTube in 2016. It is also easy to find material from other comedians that Humphrey discusses online and on DVD. This includes the work of the prominent comedian Hagimoto Kin'ichi (who features heavily in the book and is likely, the reader might suspect, Humphrey's own favorite). Humphrey's choice of material thereby helps the reader to follow his argument and allows for timely engagement and alternative readings, potentially even in the classroom.

Whilst the book is therefore accessible to readers with a limited grounding in Japanese culture, it presumes a greater familiarity with cultural theorists and its academic rigor here can sometimes be a double-edged sword. There is much to learn and reflect on from Humphrey's detailed analysis of specific sources, both comedy and commentary. The extensive references to cultural theorists such as Bakhtin, Bergson, Jameson, and Žižek, while enriching the analysis, might be overwhelming for some readers. These theoretical connections, though relevant, may not always be accessible, potentially making the text more challenging to follow for those approaching the book from a different background. Additionally, the names of these theorists are not included in the book's otherwise useful index, making it more difficult to revisit earlier engagements with an author or go back to the first introduction of their ideas.

But this is only a minor caveat, and one could argue that an academic book does not have to be easy to read – just as, as Humphrey argues, a book on comedy does not have to be funny. Humphrey's book might not always be easy to read or funny, but it is nevertheless a rewarding read. It provides profound analysis, engaging insights, and a robust contextual framework that will undoubtedly serve as a reference point for future research. The book underscores the central role of comedy in Japanese popular culture and highlights its importance in the broader field of Japanese Studies. Humphrey's work should ensure that the study of comedy takes a more prominent place in academic discourse and is recognized for its cultural and social significance.

In conclusion, *The Time of Laughter* is a must-read for scholars of Japanese media, humor, and cultural studies, offering a rich and nuanced understanding of how comedy functions within the Japanese media landscape. It is accessible to readers with hitherto limited engagement with the world of Japanese comedy and situates those examples which might be familiar to English-speaking audiences in an illuminating historical and cultural context.