

Till Weingärtner, *Comedy-Boom in Japan: Performative und mediale Rahmung von Humor in der aktuellen Populärkultur* [Comedy Boom in Japan: Performative and Media Framing of Humor in the Current Popular Culture]. Iaponia Insula, 27. Munich: Iudicium, 2013, 430 pp., 50 ill.

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In his Ph.D. dissertation, successfully defended at the Free University of Berlin in 2012 and now printed, Till Weingärtner focuses on the modern phenomenon of comedy in Japan as expressed in stand-up comedy either in entertainment clubs or on the stage in a TV studio. The specific form of comedy consists of two, sometimes three characters on the stage with no props who either present monologues or dialogues and engage in humorous, sometimes even vitriolic exchanges, with one figure normally more sophisticated than the other, and yet still being the victim of confusion and misunderstandings, a situation which causes the audience to laugh about both. This 'manzai' has gained tremendous popularity in Japan during the last decade, and Weingärtner offers an extensive analysis of a large number of recorded scenes of 'owarai' or comic performances, in total 750 hours aired by TV stations during the author's stay in Kansai from April 2006 to May 2008. But he also draws from related comedy genres in Japan, such as the sketch comedy, the solo comedy, and 'rakugo.' It remains unclear whether Weingärtner limited his study to those recordings, or whether he also included many others from previous years, as his comments and subsequent analysis implies. He selected, for instance, the TV program *Bakushō On Air Battle* of the station NHK, aired between 1999 and 2010, and the program *Enta no kamisama*, aired by Nihon TV between 2003 and 2010, which allows him, significantly, to develop a broader historical overview reflecting contemporary Japanese society.

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Following a survey of the relevant research literature dedicated to this genre of humor and comedy at large and in specifics, called 'manzai,' the author begins his analysis of the historical development of the 'shabekuri manzai' since the 1920s, then turns his attention to the next stages in this genre during the 1960s, the 1980s, and then since ca. 2000, when the popularity of 'manzai' virtually exploded. Finally he focuses on the emergence of the 'rakugo' since 2005 as the most successful version. Before he begins with his interpretation of individual shows and programs, Weingärtner discusses the theoretical concept relevant for this genre of stand-up comedy, the frame, or frame analysis, as first developed by Erving Goffman (1974/1986), without which much of the comedy in these stand-up settings would not work, especially because of the difference between a primary and a modulated frame, through which various modes of comedy are made possible. The stand-up comedy is deeply determined by the relationship between the actor/s and the audience since props rarely ever come into use. We face here a phenomenon of impromptu comedy, to which the laughter of the audience contributes in an essential manner because the comedian measures his success critically by the force which he exerts on the audience, making them laugh, whether they understand the cause fully or not.

Weingärtner defines the 'manzai' specifically by the interaction between a serious and a simple-minded partner, which probably finds numerous parallels in similar stand-up shows in US or UK TV programs. One might even wonder whether this relatively new form of TV performance is characteristic of one specific national culture, or whether we do not observe here an internationalization of humor in the age of the postmodern media world. As large as that topic might be, as important it would have been for this study. We can only hope that the author accepts this recommendation as a challenge for his own future research.

Subsequently he turns his analytical lens to the large corpus of recorded 'manzai,' from which he discusses a good number of individual cases. The author often cites whole passages of conversations both in the original Japanese and in German translation. His analysis appears to address the critical issues and offers good explanation of how the comedy works. I wonder,

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however, where the typical Japanese sense of humor might come through here, since most of the scenes performed by the actors appear to be too general or too international (including the delivery of a pizza) as to shed significant light on modern Japanese culture. Or is the latter already so globalized that specific features are no longer discernible?

Next, Weingärtner emphasizes the important role of the frame and its transgression, which he exemplifies with a large number of cases. As his analysis makes clear, without the frame and its break-down much of the humor would not work well, since the audience must perceive the events on the stage as artificial and yet as familiar for themselves. While the primary frame consists of an interaction between performers and the audience, the dialogue frame limits the communication to the former and allows the latter only to observe and listen. The situational frame consists of a situation in which the comedian no longer represents himself, but another person, whereby a more theatrical condition is created. Weingärtner also discusses a variety of other factors that distinguish subgroups of 'manzai.'

In the following chapter the author discusses other *o-warai* genres, although he rather means specific performer groups and their strategies to achieve comedy. Here Weingärtner's own data and collected recordings come most impressively into play. To what extent, however, a characteristic Japanese genre or humor has been identified, remains rather obscure. Both Japanese and Western entertainers relying on stand-up comedy seem to rely on very similar, if not even identical motifs and themes, perhaps because the life-styles of modern societies begin to resemble each other increasingly. But that speculation seems a bit trite and unsatisfactory.

There is no doubt that Weingärtner's analysis has given us excellent insight into this obviously important Japanese form of media entertainment especially from the last decade or so, but ultimately his conclusions would have to be tested in a broader context, unless we would have to say that Japanese laugh about the same issues and concerns as all other people in the West do. Perhaps the exclusive focus on this Westernized TV entertainment lends itself for such a

generalization, but I would doubt its validity in such general terms.

The book concludes with the extensive bibliography, a list of DVDs used for his study, a list of TV recordings, internet sites, a list of the illustrations, transcripts of four 'manzai' and their German translation, and an English abstract.