

***Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture.***  
**By Peter Narváez, ed. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003.**  
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analyse le soin de conclure sur cette résolution de conflit qui permet aux différents actes de communication se rapportant à l'art de faire peur de sortir de l'impasse dans laquelle la finitude humaine nous inscrit tous, puisque toutes les peurs ne sont toujours que des variations sur le thème plus englobant, voire même horrifiant, de la peur de la mort. « En ce sens, le discours qui dit la peur joue un sale rôle social, celui de rendre acceptable l'absurde conclusion de la condition humaine » (181).

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***Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture.*** By Peter Narváez, ed. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003. Pp. viii+358, ISBN 0-87421-559-5)

*Of Corpse* brings together new and recent compositions which more or less focus on humorous folkloric responses to death. Although the contributions are inconsistent in terms of quality, it seems that this is more a consequence of the marginal and/or ambivalent place of humour scholarship in general within the field of folklore than any fault of the editor. As a collection, it should find a place in both humour and belief bibliographies, despite the somewhat niche aspect of its subject matter (which in turn makes it an unlikely candidate as a potential textbook for all but the most esoteric of advanced folklore courses).

Following a brief introduction by Narváez, which I will return to presently, the anthology begins with a contribution from Christie Davies on jokes following mediated disasters. It is his contention that, as media saturates us with news of an event, especially in juxtaposition to the other contents of media saturation — advertisements, simplistic programming, vernacular entertainments —, whatever sincere and sombre reaction we may have had to the event is quickly transformed into cynicism, which opens the way for humour. Cynicism in the face of tragedy may indeed be the basic defensive mechanism, as is demonstrated through examples from former Eastern Bloc countries. Davies denies the fruitfulness in trying to understand jokes in terms of their function, save as a source of amusement. Older media forms, unidirectional and run by large interests, were never so much a source

for disaster jokes as they were a conduit for context: it is new media, specifically internet, which allows for exchange of joking materials and their archiving in a manner parallel to oral communication.

This is the approach Bill Ellis takes in his contribution on 9/11 jokes, "Making a Big Apple Crumble," reprinted here from the online journal *New Directions in Folklore*. Building on his own proposed model for how WTC jokes would disseminate, Ellis meticulously traces some of the lineage of these jokes, identifying initial virulent reactions to them and subsequent acceptance on a global (English language) scale. In addition to its important content, this piece will be indispensable as a methodological model for anyone who wishes to conduct similar internet-based research in the future.

Following the "Disaster Jokes" section are three entries under the heading "Rites of Passage." The first two, Ilana Harlow's "Creating Situations" and Narváez's own "Tricks and Fun," deal with the merry wake phenomenon, in Ireland and Newfoundland respectively. Both are good pieces with relative strengths, but in an anthology such as this one they come across as slightly repetitive, especially when one is reading straight through (as I did for purposes of this review). Narváez's decision to place his after Harlow's is also problematic, as neither of these is new for this volume, and Harlow's came after Narváez's and indeed cites him frequently. Perhaps it would be too much to ask for a new, co-authored piece which synthesises the two, particularly as each can find a place in a work such as this.

The third rite of passage entry is Richard E. Meyer's "Pardon Me for Not Standing': Modern American Graveyard Humor." Dispensing with what might be a semantic or pedantic argument as to whether epitaphs belong in a discussion of rites of passage or whether they are a minor genre of folk literature, this is ultimately a disappointing article. The scholarship is fine, but Meyer shares with Donald Consentino a certain glibness when it comes to the subject. He writes as if the discussion of humour is by definition a "cute" or at least tangential offshoot from more serious scholarship. His appendix, a bogus set of conference paper abstracts circulated among the Cemeteries and Gravemarkers section of the American Culture Association, may have found a home in a work on the occupational folklore of scholars, but its inclusion here I found somehow insulting.

The next four chapters are on “Festivals.” Jack Kugelmass’s “Wishes Come True: Designing the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade” is good to see in reprint, both for its interesting ethnographical approach and as a study of the slow de-counter-hegemonic processes which seem inevitable for any festival occasion. Its inclusion here is predicated on the assumption that Halloween is associated with death, and — more importantly — that those involved in the parade make that same association. I feel it is not proven, although it was never Kugelmass’s concern to make that argument.

Mexico’s Day of the Dead and the use of the *calavera* is the focus of the next two chapters, one by Kristin Congdon on iconic humour and one by Stanley Brandes on literary humour. This sharp delineation permits little redundancy between the two, unlike the Harlow-Narváez pairing. Congdon’s focus is the iconic use of the *calavera* (which she translates as “skeleton”), in both Day of the Dead celebrations and in Mexican material culture in general, and traces its metaphorical and editorial uses to the satirical newspapers of the late nineteenth century, best illustrated by the work of José Guadalupe Posada, a lithographer and editorial cartoonist of that era. Congdon’s work is principally based on other sources, save for some original field photos taken at Orlando city hall. Brandes, in turn, looks at the literary *calavera* (which he translates as “skull”), typically satirical poems in the form of humorous epitaphs for living figures which appear in broadsides and newspapers in the days surrounding the Day of the Dead. Both authors introduce their respective phenomena in a way that provides good detail and context, but neither really makes a move beyond description.

Donald J. Cosentino’s “Exit Laughing” purports to be about “Death and Laughter in Los Angeles and Port-au-Prince.” His discussion of attitudes to death in Los Angeles is reduced to Foxworthian or Smirnovian observations of a Californian denial/kitsch-sincerity dialectic. Most of the rest of the reading is on the figure of Gede in the Vodou pantheon: at times it is folkloric and talks about festival; at other times it is religious studies and talks about theology. It makes for interesting reading (there is nothing in this entire anthology that does not make for interesting reading), but it, like Meyer’s, seems strung together from old bits of research, reflects on the fieldwork experience in a wistful or nostalgic way, and is approached as an amusing diversion from his serious research. “Glib” is not a term one wishes to use twice in the same review, but Meyers and Cosentino have forced me to it.

Luanne K. Roth's "Dancing Skeletons" introduces the last section of the book, "Popular Culture." Her work on the "subversion" of death among followers of the Grateful Dead makes connections between legends surrounding the band's origins and the origins of its name, the appeal of skeletal iconography to the illustrators of concert posters in late 1960s San Francisco and subsequent image-makers, and an ethic of fans based on emic interpretations of the "Grateful Dead" motif (E341) and relevant Märchen (AT 506A and B; 506A, B, and C). Her research is strong, and she does not interpret the levity and play aspects of her subject matter as an opportunity for less rigorous analysis. I look forward to her full book on Deadheads.

Mikel J. Koven's "Traditional Narrative, Popular Aesthetics, *Weekend at Bernie's*, and Vernacular Cinema" joins with Ellis's chapter to bookmark this collection with detailed and focused studies of cultural phenomenon that also suggest methodological frameworks for future analogous studies. His chapter, which examines the box office success and ongoing popularity of *Weekend at Bernie's* despite almost universal critical disdain, proceeds first by a careful cross-comparison to pre-existing motifs within oral tradition (the absence of which partially accounts for the lack of success of *Weekend at Bernie's II*) and then by proposing the concept of "vernacular cinema;" to paraphrase, as the cinematic extension of folk cultures, conversant with but happily existing apart from "higher" or more reflexive forms of cinema, which are in turn extensions of "higher" narrative contexts. In this way, Koven's notion of vernacular cinema, if extended to other realms of popular entertainment, acts as a palliative to Christie Davies's invective against what he perceives to be the banality of much television: when operating within a different framework one employs different contextualizing apparatuses.

To return to Narváez's introduction, having read the entire anthology, there is one word he uses that perplexes me. The title of his introduction is "The Death-Humor Paradox." Each author demonstrates that folk cultures are quite comfortable juxtaposing death and humour. With such overwhelming evidence, one is forced to ask the question, "Wither the paradox?" What is it within our perspective — "our" being expanded to include any potential reader who at first read would not consider the use of the word paradox peculiar — that imposes a disassociation between death and humour? Perhaps some of it is terminological. When discussing the genus "humour and..." one should

perhaps distinguish between “death” (the concrete yet unfathomable state of being “not alive”), “dying” (the gerund for the act of transition from life to death), “the dying” (the noun for those whose death is imminent), and “the dead” (those whose death is a going concern). Perhaps it is perspectival. Consider Stalin’s “A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic” and Mel Brooks’ “Tragedy is when I get a paper cut on my little finger. Comedy is when you fall in a manhole and die.” The word “paradox” has two meanings, which are actually opposites of each other: it is either a statement which is seemingly true but is in fact self-contradictory, or it is a statement which is seemingly self-contradictory but is in fact true. This book supplies ample arguments that, despite one’s initial expectations, humour and death, and the related pairing of joy and grief, are to be found together as often as they are kept separate.

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***Identity and Everyday Life: Essays in the Study of Folklore, Music and Popular Culture.*** By Harris M. Berger and Giovanna P. Del Negro. (Middletown (CT): Wesleyan University Press, 2004. Pp. xvii+185, table of contents, notes, works cited, index, ISBN 0-8195-6687-X, pbk.)

Berger and Del Negro’s collaborative work, *Identity and Everyday Life*, is a critical examination of the notions of self, reflexivity, and identity as presented in expressive culture, and is a valuable source for scholars interested in theoretical issues related to folklore, music, and cultural studies. However, for readers looking for an accessible study of identity presented through numerous examples and cultural foci, Berger and Del Negro’s book is unsuitable, mainly due to its complex written style and lack of case studies in a condensed form. Furthermore, the theoretical positioning of the essays in combination with the book’s extensive philosophical content is overly advanced for the reader interested in a panoply of folklore, popular culture and music. The title of the book indicates a broader spectrum of folklore, culture, and music than is actually discussed within its parameters. *Identity and Everyday Life* could have also included a greater examination of these general terms, and further examples of performance and culture would have