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Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2001. xix + 274 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$22.95 (pb), \$49.50 (cl). ISBN 0-8047-3894-7.

Review by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

The main title of Rae Beth Gordon's ambitious new book may be a bit misleading. The French reception of Jerry Lewis comes up only at the very end—in a twelve-page epilogue, which explicates such films as *The Bell Boy* (1960) and *The Nutty Professor* (1962). The rest of the book focuses on late-nineteenth-century entertainment, especially comic acts whose humor is perhaps difficult to understand today. Among them were performers who showed a talent for bizarre facial tics, contortions, and epileptic-like convulsions. Other crowd-pleasers were drunks, hunchbacks, women with limps, legless men, dwarfs, and "idiot comics" (singing nonsensical lyrics). Hypnotized subjects, violent marionettes, and all manner of "automatic" behaviors also fascinated and amused. The dismemberment of human bodies was a sensational feature of magicians' acts and some early animated films. And the staples of comedy included stories of diarrhea and enemas—in music-hall jokes and in early films such as *Pull the Chain Please*, *Effects of Melon*, and *It's Papa Who's Taking the Enema*. Was there something sick in all this? Gordon answers a resounding "yes": these were all spectacles of "nervous pathology."

The author's explanation is based on the widespread interest in nervous disorders and the surge of alarming medical theories expounded in the late nineteenth century. The tics, grimaces, and convulsive movements that doctors associated with nervous pathologies showed up on stage in comic form, she argues. "Hysteria" was a particularly capacious catch-all of diverse behaviors and symptoms, which readily caught the imagination of entertainers and early film critics as well as psychologists. "Hysteria is the illness in vogue," wrote Dr. Paul-Max Simon in 1881 (p. 93): "It is everywhere." Guided by that era's diffuse notions of the pathological, Gordon proceeds in chapter after chapter to point out instances of "hysterical" symptoms in performance styles, which were startling harbingers of an emergent modernist aesthetic. The wildly dancing characters in pioneering films by George Méliès and Emile Cohl, for example, were like Dr. Charcot's patient compulsively doing the tarantella at La Salpêtrière. Gordon maintains that entertainers and audiences shared not only a preoccupation with psychological disorders, but also a familiarity with the new theories of the time—especially those of Jean-Martin Charcot, Théodule Ribot, Pierre Janet, Charles Henry, Alfred Binet, and Charles Féré. Many spectators, she argues, understood the comic acts as enactments of the pathologies. Clear evidence to support these assertions is, of course, not easy to supply. The instances that Gordon adduces mount up to an impressive quantity, but many of them are ambiguous.

Gordon also finds nineteenth-century psychological theories to be the key to understanding audiences' reactions. Spectators were drawn to what they feared—from deformities to insanity—and the entertainers served it all up in abundance. That greatly worried some prominent psychologists and doctors, for they believed that sensational and shocking shows caused mental illness, a worry that spread to many non-professionals as well. The "nervous pathologies" in the limelight were believed to be contagious. Because spectators unconsciously imitated the staged emotions and bodily movements, the very sight of an epileptic attack, doctors warned, could bring on epilepsy—and insanity. Frenetic singers and dancers could cause hallucinations and hysteria in the audience, and the cabaret acts of hypnotists (or "magnetizers") could put the spectators into a dangerous trance. Underlying all these concerns was a widespread fear of "the low"—the instinctual and the uncontrolled, a fear reinforced by fashionable theories of degeneration. Yet the very shows that aroused anxieties also brought the pleasures of laughter and reassurance. Spectators enjoyed seeing the less fortunate and the out-of-control on display: it reaffirmed their own sense of superiority and their sense of control.

In making the strongest case for her argument, Gordon tends to overstate the place of the pathological in entertainment and to underrate the popularity of sweetly romantic lyrics (like Paul Delmet's), for example, the graceful dancing of Loïe Fuller, and the many comics who told jokes about mothers-in-law, dumb bosses, and the presidents of the Third Republic. As Michael Miller showed years ago, fin-de-siècle psychiatrists linked kleptomania to hysteria and blamed the new department stores for a rising incidence of the malady, yet most shoppers went on shopping without becoming criminal or pathological. Similarly, as Dominique Kalifa and others have shown, anxious critics of criminal *faits divers* and crime novels invoked psychological notions of suggestibility and "imitation" to buttress their alarms, while most readers read for vicarious thrills without going further.[1] The author's identification of hysteria and other nervous disorders, too, seems strained in many cases. Was the appeal of a quivering sexy dancer such as Polaire really due to associations with hysteria? Early film comedies showed plenty of fast, frenetic action, to be sure, but did "hysterical movement, gesture and vision constitute the very basis of comic effect"? (p. 172) Even before the discourse of hysteria emerged, French audiences showed an appreciation of clowning that entailed lots of wacky (even violent) movements and behaviors. In short, readers of the evidence presented by Gordon will differ, I think, on whether the displays of jerky, exaggerated movements were references to such disorders as epilepsy or hysteria.

So why do the French love Jerry Lewis?—or, more accurately, why did they a half century ago? By the time the reader reaches the last chapter, the answer is fairly clear, but the epilogue is helpful with its direct, detailed commentary on Lewis's movies and their success with critics and audiences. Gordon's answer, in short, is that the comic tradition of the late nineteenth century remained residually in the French consciousness, and Jerry Lewis tapped into it (as did Louis de Funès). This explanation invokes the same psychological theories set forth throughout the book and presumes their continuing validity into the second half of the twentieth century.

Though the author overreaches (I think) in interpreting the evidence, she presents a provocative, original argument. After reading this book, one inevitably will think of the nineteenth-century psychological notions when looking back at the many representations of doubled personalities, hypnotism, hallucinations, somnambulism, and "hysteria" in popular culture. Those old theories may not explain as much as Gordon maintains, but they do give us a way of understanding that was

contemporaneous with the representations, and the perspectives they offer do provide grounds for fresh wonder at much turn-of-the-century entertainment.

NOTES

[1] Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), and Dominique Kalifa, *L'Encre et le sang* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

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