Nicole Matthews: Comic Politics.
Gender in Hollywood comedy after the new right
Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000, 162 S, ISBN 0-719-5503-2,
£ 11.99

The blurb on the backcover says that *Comic Politics* argues that "the rubber
faces of 1980s/1990s comedy films helped to transform us into flexible, self-
managing citizens beloved of the new right and [...] provides a critical introduction
to key approaches to comedy. It tests the usefulness and limits of psychoanalytic,
postmodernist theory against comedians and comedies." Well, yes and no.

Matthews divides her book into four chapters. The first short introductory
chapter asks the question "Is it useful to analyse popular contemporary comedies?"
and unsurprisingly the answer is "yes". Any popular text influences and reflects
the way in which we view our world but also perpetuates hierarchies of class and

gender, reflecting and reinforcing the political ideologies of the day. Matthews finds it useful to evaluate how these comedies make sense of the political climate of the '80s and '90s which „rather than looking toward collective ways of solving social problems [...] the new right (Reagan and Thatcher) and it's successors have placed their faith in the power of individuals and their families to identify, plan for and act upon difficulties that face them" (p.10).

Her second chapter asks the question "Is parody political?" And again, her answer is unsurprisingly: it can be to some people, but it is difficult to assess how individual viewers watch this kind of comedy because so much of it is intertextual and self-referential. You have to be a film buff to get all the references in the *Hotshots* and the *Scream* series, but that doesn't necessarily mean these jokes are received as subversive.

The idea of gender and identity as performance is introduced in her third chapter. She throws a lot of differing theoretical approaches at this idea, in an uneven manner, to see if any stick: feminism, psychoanalytical approaches (can women laugh?), differences between female spectators, understanding gender as a (comic) performance, comedians performing identity – comparing Eddie Murphy's and Robin William's cross-dressing antics and transformations with Whoopie Goldberg's screen roles –, performing the self through consumption, gendering the personality through consumption, performing the personality through the voice. This scatter-shot approach doesn't allow for clear conclusions to be drawn but somehow from this morass she is able to say "At a moment when governments have urged flexibility and self-management on their labour force, it seems Eddie Murphy, Jim Carrey, Robin Williams and Co. showed us how it could be done" (p.98).

Her last chapter is the most interesting. In it she discusses the reoccurring theme of many of these family-oriented comedies which is that of a crisis in parenthood: irresponsible fathers, childish and childlike fathers and absent mothers and fathers. Matthews believes these family comedies can be seen as offering „ethical scenarios to their audiences in which the new right talks through the figure of the father to a wider audience [...] not simply about the measurement of fatherly responsibility, but as about the measurement of responsibility per se" (p.127). What is important here is the way the new right has couched its ideology in terms of responsibility: responsible families, responsible citizens. What is interesting to us is how these films propagate these messages.

Comic Politics clearly has the feel of someone's doctorate stretched into book length. Matthews tells us what others think but at times it is unclear how she reaches her own conclusions and what her opinions actually are. What is missing from this book, which would seem to me to support her arguments, is a discussion of the career trajectories over the last 20 years of Eddie Murphy, Steve Martin

and Co. which have positioned them less as subversive or rebellious jesters but more as conservative holders of the status quo.

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