

BOOK REVIEW

Rolf Brednich's legend research extended to cyberspace

Rolf Wilhelm Brednich. www.worldwidewitz.com. Humor im Cyberspace. Herder Spektrum 5547. Freiburg & Basel & Wien: Herder 2005, 160 pp.



The cover of the book features a cartoon: a bridegroom in front of the church, awkwardly standing between two brides who squint at each other, corners of mouths drawn downwards. The groom asks the bride whose hand he is not holding: "Didn't you get my emails?"

Whoever picks up the book realises that it is a topical treatment of modern and future means of communication. And the reader will not be disappointed: since his four bestsellers on contemporary legends, Rolf W. Brednich has entered a new medium - the Internet. Like any of his books of legends, this one does not only include a treatment but also a brilliant foreword,

presenting an overview of recent developments in legend research and cyber studies. Therefore it is advisable that readers not familiar with the field start by reading the foreword before turning to the truly entertaining example texts, as it helps to better understand Brednich's selection criteria and at the same time guides the reader's attention to particular aspects in the book.

The author begins by providing an overview of the thoroughly-discussed history of oral and written humour, vital for understanding a cyberjoke, and notes that while a hearty laughter may be suggestive of oral interaction, attempts to press folk humour between book covers have been made since the early days of writing. This momentous step also marked the beginning of mediating humour.

R. Brednich's contemplations on the history of humour and laughter continue with a retrospect on the publication of joke books (Schwankbuch) in Early Modern times and especially during Renaissance, characterised by the boom of popular books. A new genre emerged - namely, anecdote books, which contents and spread has been exhaustively studied from the ethnological point of view. Brednich argues that the next level of media humour was prompted by the invention of typewriter. A brief study on the view was published already in 1911. Some of the then texts distributed in the form of typewritten copies have made a leap to the cyber

age. With the introduction of Xerox technology in the 1970s, the folklore of bureaucracy, as recently departed Alan Dundes referred to it, took on a new dimension. This medium and fax machine introduced shortly thereafter enabled to reproduce and spread, with lightning speed, not only texts but also visual jokes, including those that cannot be categorised under any ecotypes.

In the mid-1980s, electronic humour interaction began to replace earlier forms and today search engines yield thousands of pages of humour. This phenomenon has so far been considered mostly in legend research. Brednich eagerly compared the compilers of these websites with Early Modern literati and points out two aspects: a tendency to laconicism on the one hand and the discarding of background information on the other hand. Like Lutz Rörich in his book *Der Witz: Figuren, Formen, Funktionen* (Stuttgart; Metzler), published in 1977, Brednich prefers to categorise jokes according to contents. The notion of context in Internet humour has been discussed only by Elliott Oring (*Engaging Humor*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2003). The most interesting term here is what Brednich calls glocalization - relocalisation in a globalising process, where humour characters typical of a given country were introduced in the setting of a global event (disaster jokes, e.g. September 11, 2001, the Challenger accident and tsunami disasters).

It is not only the ways of communication that have changed, but so has fieldwork. Brednich takes the next step by discussing the source value of email inboxes. Their practical worth lies in that they can be used in personal home computers. Brednich studied this topic with a help from his friends for more than five years as an armchair researcher, just like the Grimm Brothers long before him.

Relying on his studies, he explains his choices of selecting for his publication email humour as a mirror of personal messages in the whole world, and by that already sorted to some extent. Next to this selective filter, he mentions others. Very gratifyingly, in the framework of narrative research, he also discusses texts which exhibit traditional structure and contents, but also specific tendencies. One such tendency appears to contradict his comment in the beginning of the book (about jokes becoming shorter), because the length of internet humour is increasingly growing (p. 21) since new users are more used to larger bodies of texts and have certain intellectual abilities that - and here I must agree with Brednich - affect the level of a joke.

Brednich's comment on the so-called epic laws of folktelling, which have become more and more questionable in the new medium, is also highly intriguing. Popular motifs keep appearing in new variants - of course,

scholars of the field have known it all along. Brednich argues that the most remarkable innovations are the lists that its members can continue more or less infinitely in this so-called cumulative medium.

I would also like to emphasise Brednich's note on research potential: anthropology of communicative processes pays, on average, more attention to the Internet than to television, especially in analyses of media consumption of the youth. There have been other changes as well, many of which have not even been studied, such as humorous digital PowerPoint presentations and video clips in .mpeg format.

Most of the quality texts presented on the following 127 pages are simply brilliant. The new humour anthology, which for the sake of academic globalization ought to be translated into other languages, is Rolf Brednich's gift to his admirers and will surely attract new readers. The author has also cleverly mentioned that the readers of the book deserve it...

Sabine Wienker-Piepho