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From The Times

July 8, 2009

A funny kind of subject

A symposium on the science of laughter shows that jokes are no laughing matter

Heard the one about the academics who gathered at the University of Granada for a sober “International Symposium on Humour And Laughter”? Now *that’s* funny. But was anything else about the conference? Whenever someone sets about a solemn analysis of humour, you wilt a little. The American writer E. B. White was convinced not only that humour cannot be explained, but also that you shouldn’t even try. “Humour can be dissected as a frog can,” White said, “but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”

Not that there has been any shortage of pure minds that have mulled the nature of humour, from Plato and Schopenhauer to Kant and Freud. Hemingway, astutely and typically, confined his thoughts on the subject to the brisk observation that: “It always seemed to me that in those who make jokes in life the seeds are covered with better soil and with a higher grade of manure.”

Why not just leave it at that? Because who can say for sure what will make someone else laugh? Each joke is like a blind date: some work for you, others don’t. It’s personal taste. You can say: “I can see that *Ulysses* is a great novel, but I didn’t enjoy it.” But you can’t say: “I know that’s funny, but it just didn’t make me laugh.” Yes, there are broad demarcation lines: Groucho Marx is funny; Karl Marx, not so much. Sometimes what was funny, no longer is: Brian Rix farces, say. And what wasn’t funny, now is; politicians, for instance.

A Swiss professor told the conference that Britons are among the most likely to fear that they are the butt of a joke. Given that Darwin thought laughter was man’s way of sublimating the ancient urge to kill, is this reaction really so funny?

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