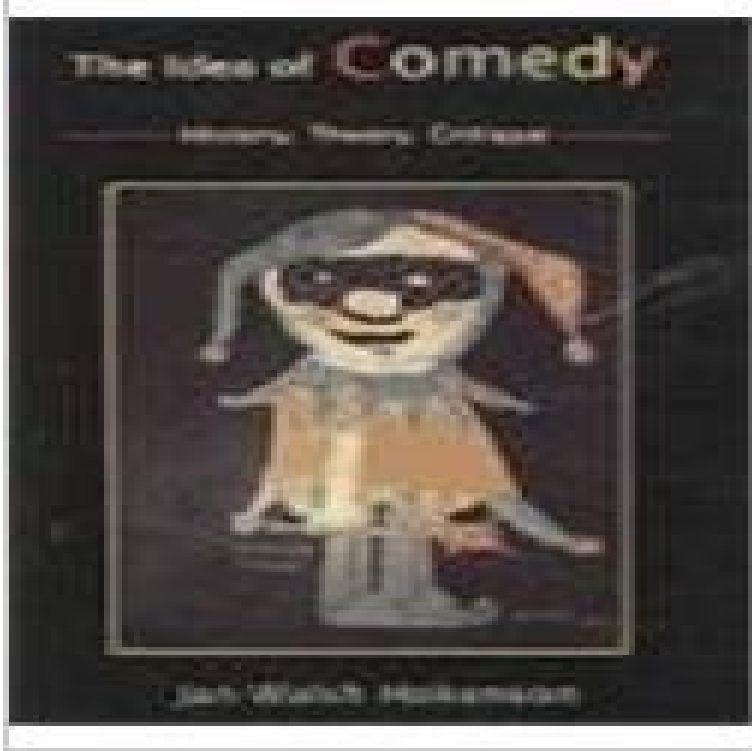


The Idea of Comedy: History, Theory, Critique



One of the few constants in Western critical thought for over two millennia has been the inexhaustible fascination with comedy: what it is and how it works. Yet comedy has eluded every definition. Why have so many of the leading critics and philosophers of the West proposed theories and counter-theories of comedy while often admitting that it entralls and baffles the mind in equal measure? *The Idea of Comedy: A Critique* assembles a rich corpus of materials from different languages and eras to construct a history of the commentaries and reflections, the theoretical postulates and conjectures, and the often acrimonious debates about comedy through the centuries from Plato and Aristotle to our contemporaries. The aim is dual: to situate comic theories in their historical moment, as participants in the wider intellectual currents of their time, and to trace underlying types of consensus and dispute running through different theories and intellectual generations. The book brings into view the full landscape of comic theory as a field of ideas, a terrain of thought extending from antique to recent conceptions. Disengaging unstated premises to show how the theoretical discourse about comedy often enacts the intellectual disputes of its time, *The Idea of Comedy* tracks the history of comic theories along two principle axes. The first is historical, showing how the Hellenistic ethical conception devolves into social superiority and then into populist assertions, ending on the question of whether contemporary comic theory is still populist today. It thus traces the intellectual lineage of the idea of comedy as it is inherited and reconfigured in changing intellectual and social contexts, and in response to new generations of comic writers. The second axis is conceptual, sorting theories by types of agreement and dispute. Whether comedy improves the citizen or threatens political stability,

whether it insults or enacts moral standards, whether it serves God and the integrated superego or the devil and the anarchic id, are some of the questions addressed by theorists such as Cicero, Maggi, Dryden, Kant, Schopenhauer, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, and Genette. The Idea of Comedy traces the arc from ethical to social conceptions by advancing from Greek and Roman commentators and medieval grammarians to the Renaissance construction of social norms as the engine of comedy. Many subsequent theories echo and reconfigure that legacy, even as dissident voices arise among Augustans and Romantics. In modernism, the dominant twentieth-century theory adapts Aristotle and more immediate predecessors to recast the age-old satiric view in ritualist, archetypal, and psychoanalytic terms. A counter-discourse ultimately inverts that model to supplant comic butt with comic hero. Both types of modernist theories share the social nexus and neglect certain literary forms, while quarreling over others. Another arc in this history is the long neglect of Attic forms in comic theory, and the longstanding erasure of the Middle Ages in the idea of comedy. Postmodernist theories mark a brief interlude in the critical discourse, yet they open the way to several striking developments since 1990. Contemporary comic theorists continue the venerable tradition of quarreling with their predecessors, contesting the critical legacy in order to construct new theoretical models for the experience of comedy.

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