AN ANATOMY OF HUMOR

Arthur Asa Berger

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 92-18197
ISBN: 1-56000-086-4
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Berger, Arthur Asa, 1933-
An anatomy of humor / Arthur Asa Berger
Includes bibliographic references and index.
p. cm.
ISBN 1-56000-086-4 (cloth)
1. Wit and humor—History and criticism. 2. Wit and humor—Psychological aspects. I. Title.
PN6147.B47 1992
809.7—dc20

92-18197
CIP

Foreword

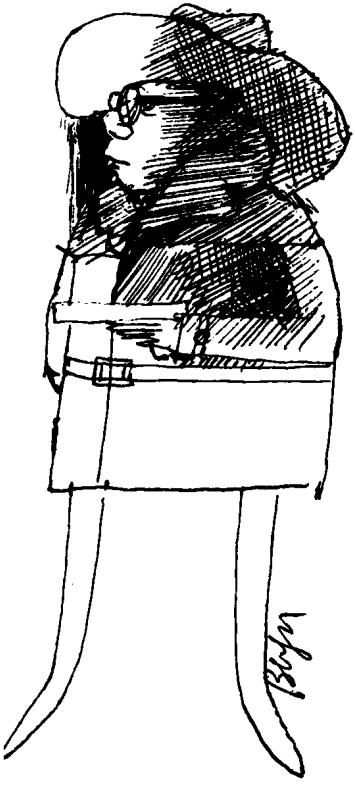
William F. Fry, Jr.

There have been several strange periods of his life, when Arthur Asa Berger has referred to himself as a Secret Agent. This presentation could be regarded as rather bizarre behavior on the part of a university professor and distinguished man of letters if we are to understand it as intended to be a literal statement of fact. However, even though on the bizarre side, it might be considered plausible, when academia is inspected from a historical perspective and specific cases are counted.

Professor Berger wouldn't be the first scholar to don the invisible uniform and sally forth to collect arcane or privy information for the benefit of some organization or other to which he or she might feel a bond or tie. I am sure that other sociologists or pop culturists or semiologists or behavioral scientists of various persuasions have been the literal type of secret agent on numerous occasions. As a matter of fact, my anthropologist mentor, Gregory Bateson, was a member of the World War II wartime spy organization, OSS, during most of the years of the war in the Pacific. He had done anthropology fieldwork on many of the Southwest Pacific islands in prewar years, was familiar with the territory and had many friends among the island inhabitants. His "Secret Agent" services were of great value to the Allied war efforts against the Axis. Bateson was neither the first nor the last scholarly spy, nor would be Berger.

However, when we turn to gaze upon this professor who thus identifies himself, the potentiality of his performing the role of a literal, authentic Secret Agent fades, and swiftly transmogrifies into something, much more reminiscent of the blathering of an addled mind. Granted that a certain degree of flexibility must be applied when taking appearances into account on this spy business. Wartime spy though he skillfully and beneficially was, Bateson did not present the expected image of Secret Agent. He was tall, over six feet in height, with a craggy handsomeness, emanating prominence and uniqueness; not the appearance usually asso-

ciated with Secret Agents, who are envisioned as gray, somewhat dumpy, and of medium height, with a doughy flab under their chins and around their belt-lines.



But Berger, although of a quite different sort, looks even more unlikely than Bateson when one weighs the possibilities of his being a functionary mole. Arthur is shorter than medium height; his limbs show a graceful delicateness more frequently associated with a skilled musician or theoretical physicist than with a Secret Agent. Most remarkable, and certainly completely incompatible with the background-blending anonymity necessary for Secret Agent survival, his head is topped with a wildly unruly thatch of bright pink hair. This tint comes from nature, not from a bottle or tube; and it is a standout in any crowd. Further, far from traditional

Secret Agent secretiveness, Arthur is frequently found to be augmenting the impact of nature's gift by indulging his enthusiasm for wearing orange sweatshirts. He also drives an orange automobile. Seeing Arthur driving down the avenue, pink on orange on orange, is a phenomenon impossible to ignore or forget. Surely, few persons aspiring to be true, authentic Secret Agents have worse prospects. Is Berger to be politely, but firmly, escorted into some quiet nook where he can continue to indulge his quaint conceit, sheltered from an unbelieving world, and causing no further shocks to more tender-minded citizens?

Fortunately, this absurdity is resolved in less strenuous fashion by what Professor Berger has written and obscurely published in his sub-basement printshop under the title *The Secret Agent: Essays and Revelations on Media, Popular Culture & Everyday Life in America*. For those who may wish to explore the Professor's mind further on this matter (good luck) and are not privy to a copy of the *Secret Agent* tome, an article entitled "Secret Agent" will be found in the *Journal of Communication* (spring 1974, vol. 24:2) (written by Berger, of course).

Now, what Arthur writes in explaining the meaning of the Secret Agent designation has a great deal of relevance to this present book on humor, as well as having much relevance to many other things. In fact, far from turning out to be an indication of unswerving weirdness on his part, Arthur presents in his Secret Agent concept some remarkably good sense about the roles and performances that are crucial for attaining creativity and significant contribution in scientific careers of any discipline, but most clearly so in the wide range of behavioral sciences—a range that expands almost monthly. The Secret Agent concept is not necessary Arthur's most unique contribution, nor his most outstanding; but it is a very meaty piece, affording nutrition for one's own mental adventuring, and stimulation to set forth in that adventuring. It is a clever and accurate and insightful concept.

In *The Secret Agent*, Berger wrote,

> I really am a secret agent! Not the kind of secret agent who works for governments and steals plans for missiles. I am a self-employed secret agent who searches, relentlessly, for hidden meanings and latent functions. I like to think that, like all secret agents, I shake the very foundations of society. For if society maintains itself on the basis of the unrecognized functions people engage in, when I point out these latent functions I make them recognizable (manifest) and the equilibrium in society is disturbed. . . . Thus I am a secret agent who discovers secrets and broadcasts them . . . to the world. The student of popular culture has the task of analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating whatever it is he is interested. . . . It may be best to think of our culture

as something like an onion, and as we peel away the outer layers, we find ultimately, a core of myth that has shaped everything else.

Although the terminal imagery in the above passage verges a bit into the realm of the chef, rather than that of secret agent, the general meaning of the passage makes quite clear what Berger is all about in calling himself a Secret Agent. Further clarification is offered in his article entitled "Humor and Teaching." "[I suggest] to my students that I see the everyday world. . . as full of secrets, mysteries, etc. which I'm out to discover and make known to others."

These passages make it clear that Berger is not to be taken literally in his statement about being a Secret Agent. This is clearly an artistic use of metaphor—a sort of poetic statement that must be regarded similarly as when we speak or write of the "dancing water" or a "faithless moon." Berger may do things that resemble the behavior of a true Secret Agent, but the context, intent, and results are quite different. In other words, it's not the same thing at all. To underline the difference, his Secret Agent badge carries the notations, "artist" and "writer."

This book on humor, for which I have written this Foreword, is a superb example of Professor Berger carrying out his metaphoric role as Secret Agent, turning this time his Holmesian magnifying glass onto a variety of factors active in the field of humor. It is not my role nor privilege to tabulate this variety. That is reserved for the reader. But it is my prerogative to be able to point out some highlights, and to give general comments that may enhance the reader's experience with Berger and humor.

Now that we know what the professor's all about in his Secret Agent bit, we can look for some of those secrets and latencies of which he has written and which, presumably, he is busy revealing to a generally unself-conscious world—that is, if people will read this book with any reasonable degree of care. I must say, en passant, that I have always been amazed by the low intensity of curiosity that people seem to have about themselves and their fellow humans, about the human race. This has been a general observation of mine, but has been sharpened by my career experiences as a practicing psychiatrist, being confronted repeatedly by the specter of people having to be driven by some great anguish into the most exciting adventure of life—self-discovery—and once in it, so often being internally led into thinking and talking about anything but oneself.

In launching my foreword with those comments about the Secret Agent component of Professor Berger, and then backing those introductory comments with an excellent example of how he follows through in the orientation of the Secret Agent, I have set up a certain hazard, which I must now quickly and carefully destroy. That is the hazard of creating in the mind of the eagerly anticipating reader the impression that this book is, indeed, entirely a collection of casework, a research notebook, a portfolio of files and findings, a secret agent's dossier. That is not the full measure of this book's contents. True to his pink-on-orange-on-orange tradition, there is an abundance of Arthur Asa Berger slathered into several of his chapters. Bergerism, as distinct from Secret Agentism, is particularly prominent in those chapters that are review chapters—that is reviews of various examples of humorous literature and drama.

This sleight of hand is quite subtly accomplished in the chapter entitled "Of Mice and Men." Berger starts out by posing some very solid sociology/pop culture/etc.-type questions, in good Secret Agent style. Then he performs an ultimate ploy in completely turning the stage over to the originator of The Mouse (Mickey, of course), "Let's allow Walt Disney himself to describe his (Mickey's) origin. . . ."

This seemingly guileless sequence is backed up by a few statistics and historic sentences; one hardly even notices the Bergerisms beginning to shoulder the Secret Agentisms aside. But as the chapter progresses, there is more and more pink-on-orange-on-orange until Berger ends up with tossing forth, out of his own head, a stunner that would have left poor old Walt floundering on the floor—if he were so unfortunate to still be around. As the chapter progresses, Berger leaves the Secret Agent more and more out in the cold. He wanders through castration, rags and riches, sublimation and psychohistory, power, the grotesque, brickbats, heroes, and finally brings us to the farthest end of the gastrointestinal tract—the anus. This is how the "artist" and "writer" designations get on Berger's "Secret Agent" badge. Berger keeps his promises, even the subliminal ones.

Another chapter that is quite cute in this same fashion is the one entitled "Twelfth Night." Booked as an investigation of "comedic techniques" with "social considerations," the professor starts out very Secret Agentish, quoting a few renowned, learned authorities. Little flashes of pink-on-orange-on-orange peek out from time to time, such as when he suggests—somewhat hesitantly—that there might be interpretations

other than that which one of the authorities has rather pedantically announced in his quotation. But, as he was with Walt Disney, he is generous about the stage with these authorities. And he is also generous with William Shakespeare, for this is Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* that he is reviewing. A fair amount of script is quoted from the play.

It is his choice of script that gives us flashes of pink-on-orange-on-orange. The reader will remember that a good deal of the humor in *Twelfth Night* is derived from two major sources: mistaken and hidden identities, and the character of the "clown" Malvolio. Naturally, since he is secret agenting the "comedic techniques" of the play, Berger focuses a great deal of his attention on these sources, particularly in his choice of script quotations.

A very interesting thing happens as we are reading these immortal words of the Great Bard. We are understandably beguiled by the exquisiteness; they ring with rich beauty in our brain's ears. We fall into a revery, following the rhythm of that script. We swoop; we dip; we glide.

> Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness,
> Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
> .....
> O time, thou must untangle this, not I;
> It is too hard a knot for me to untie!

While Malvolio stands around in his yellow stockings, Berger states, "Thus, Malvolio has puffed himself us horrendously and is ripe for having his balloon pricked. It is his megalomania that makes his victimization so delicious." And finally, "we can, alas relate the characters all too easily to our associates and friends, to politicians and celebrities (and perhaps even to ourselves)."

Well, that's a shock! Out of our revery. Dropped from our Shakespearean cloud. And I finish reading the chapter with the darnedest impression. See if you agree with my reaction. Do you also conclude your reading of the chapter with the impression that, somehow, Berger has succeeded in using Shakespeare's words to hoist a certain authority with his own petard ("petar")? And all without any explicit pamphleteering or bombast. Subtle. I view this as a vivid example of Authur (no *sic*) Asa Berger.

This subtle authoring in "Twelfth Night" is contrastive with an almost brutal shouldering aside of the Secret Agent's gray disguise in favor of the more explicit style that is found in Berger's Huck Finn chapter.

"Twain's achievement is impressive." "Huck is a good American." "This little episode is a commentary on the duplicity of the people and on the bubble of reputation." ". . . absurdity justifies Jim's trip in the wrong direction and describes the nonesuch; both of these matters have an existential dimension." "Jim's rebuttal is brilliant." "Huck has seen enough of society not to want much more of it." "We can even satisfy those critics who see the quest theme as dominant in American literature—and to be sure there is a quest in *Huckleberry Finn*, though it is for something a bit less tangible than the Holy Grail." "The alienation from society, then, is not a symptom of personality loss but of Huck's authenticity. . . ." "We learn that we must be skeptical. This does not mean that we must doubt everything, for absolute skepticism is untenable. . . ."

So, in this chapter, and in others in this book, we discover the Secret Agent costume being put aside, and Berger putting himself on the firing line. The Huck Finn chapter has its own unique quality of being thusly explicit, but in such a way as to inspire *con*versation and *con*troversy, rather than subdue or drown them. One is invited to a debate—as participant.

As we feast, in Professor Berger's book, on a range of styles of presentation, so we also are ordering up an even wider menu of humor types and contexts. Many of the published humor studies that I have previously read have had more narrowly focused orientations. Not to express a pejorative on this. It is simply that Berger's book deals with a wide range of humor, and others with more specifically chosen subjects. Remaining in the gustatory metaphor, this book is more like Auntie Mame's smorgasbord, with a dish for any taste, for any occasion.

The richness of content implied by the smorgasbord image is matched on a more microcosmic scale by a feature of the book that I cannot conclude my remarks without mentioning. That feature is Berger's "Glossary of the Techniques of Humor". This glossary is rather like walking along the smorgasbord table and suddenly, unexpectedly coming upon a section of the feast that consists of a fascinating assortment of delicious-looking little dishes that could—if you were to allow yourself to be so beguiled—preoccupy your appetite to at least temporary neglect of the rest of the goodies.

The inclusion of this glossary in this book is very daring, courageous, on Arthur's part. He takes the risk that the volume might become known as the "glossary" book. The nature of this unique contribution is such that

an explosion of new avenues of thought about humor can result. It is possible to imagine a myriad of innovative research studies developing from the impetus provided by consideration of implications of the glossary, and especially its various separate categories—each one a potential volume in itself—and some of the more traditional ones have actually been volumes, such as satire and irony. A little potent package.

And perhaps this glossary ties it all together for this particular book of Arthur Asa Berger. The glossary is a potent literary expression of Berger's own views of the various "techniques" of humor. It is his artistic collation of these "techniques." Berger presents an explicit and powerful statement of his knowledge and thoughts in this glossary. It is not tiptoe, hush-hush item. No sneaking around. Here are the artist and the writer in the center of the stage, in full spotlight

But also, remember the mission of Berger's Secret Agent—the shaking of "the very foundations of society." Arthur insists that he is not the sort of secret agent who goes for missiles. But I believe that his glossary will produce some fireworks as time goes on. And so this contribution irreversibly unites the Secret Agent with the artist and the writer.

Acknowledgments

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Irving Louis Horowitz, who has been kind enough (some might say courageous enough and others foolhardy enough) to publish a number of my books. We've had a long and wonderful relationship, though he complains at times that I write too many letters. I also appreciate the kind words of the referee for this book (whose name I do not know) who gave it a positive and perceptive review.

My chapter "Comics and Popular Culture" appeared first in a slightly different form in *The World & I*. This article appeared in the July 1990 issue and is reprinted with permission from *The World & I*, a publication of The Washington Times Corporation, copyright (c) 1990. My chapter on Mickey Mouse and Krazy Kat appeared in *Gay People, Sex and the Media* (1991, copyright (c) Haworth Press, 10 Alice Street, Binghamton, N.Y. 13904), edited by Michelle A. Wolf and Alfred P. Kielwasser. The lines from *The Bald Soprano* are reprinted by permission of Grove/Wiedenfeld. There are a few other previously published essays, all of which have been rewritten for this book. The introductory essay on the social and psychological implications of humor is adapted from an article that originally appeared in an issue of *American Behavioral Scientist*, January/February 1987, Sage Publications on humor that I edited. And my essay on humor and health is a revision of an essay that originally appeared in a book on information and behavior, published by Transaction Publishers. The essay on *Huckleberry Finn* is a revised version of an essay that appeared in the *Mark Twain Journal*. (1976).

Let me also express my appreciation to Bill Fry, the well- known chimp tickler, for his fine foreword. I've benefited greatly from the work of Sigmund Freud, Alan Dundes, Martin Grotjahn, Northrop Frye, Brom Weber, Harry Levin, Tom Inge, Victor Raskin, Rabbi Mordecai Rindenow, Aaron Wildavsky, Mike Noll, Dave Noble, Larry Mintz, Avner Ziv, William Fry, Harvey Mindess, and, of course, all the wonderful comedians, comic strip artists, playwrights, and novelists, who have provided material for me to analyze.

I come from a family of clowns and comedians. My brother Jason, an artist, is a compulsive and, many would say, perfectly obnoxious punster (in French, German, Yiddish and Portugese). My mother told filthy jokes

on her deathbed. One of my uncles was an Anglophile poseur. ("I want to look like I might be president of Princeton," he used to say, and he did. In fact he probably looked more like the president of Princeton than the president of Princeton does.) My uncle used two names (Jack Savel, his real name, and Jackson Gregory Savelle, his "English aristocratic" name) and could write backward as well as forward at the same speed. And my father confirmed my suspicions that I was really from royal stock. "Your highness," he would say. "It's time to take out the garbage."

There's a lot of humor in this book and a good deal of analysis of humor in terms of its social and political significance. My glossary is, I believe, an original contribution to the understanding of what makes people laugh and can be used not only to analyze humor but also to create it. I've always felt that creativity and analysis are linked together, and I deal with that subject in an essay in this book. I hope you will enjoy this book and will come away from it not feeling that "Berger hath murdered humor" but with a better understanding and more profound appreciation of humor, in its many forms.

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Introduction:
Humor, Psyche, and Society

Humor is everywhere. It insinuates itself into every aspect of our lives and sticks its big nose (Kilroy was here/ Kill-the-Roi, the king/father killer was here) in where we don't want it. It is delicious and yet, at the same time, often painful. We find humor in our conversations, in the movies, on the television screen, in books, in newspapers, in magazines, in comic strips and comic books, on the radio, in the graffiti on our bathroom walls. There is no escaping humor and there is no subject, whether it be sex, marriage, politics, religion, education, work, sports—you name it—that has not been ridiculed, joked about, and used or abused one way or another, as grist for someone's comic militancy.

Our rear ends are the butts of a thousand jokes, as are our other parts, private and not-so-private. Indeed, our most intimate relationships, our most personal problems and our most sacred beliefs provoke humor and have done so for thousands of years.

Two Jewish women are out walking. "Oy" says one to the other. "My son . . . he's a source of pain . . . but also of pleasure." "How is he a source of pain?" inquires the second woman. "He's a homosexual" replies the first woman. "And how is he a source of pleasure?" "He's going with a doctor."

St. Peter is busy minding the gate to heaven when he is called away. He asks Jesus to mind the gate for a while. While Jesus is there an old Italian man appears. "I'm looking for my son," says the man. "I loved him very much and he disappeared. I've been all over the world and asked many people if they had seen him. Everyone said they had heard of him but never had met him . . . " With tears welling in his eyes Jesus opens his arms and exclaims "Father." The old man embraces him and cries "Pinnochio."

We delight, for mysterious reasons, in comic revelations about the inadequacies of the great as well as the absurdity of those all about us. We may even enjoy jokes at our own expense—unless there is too much of a loss of dignity and we feel, too directly, the hostility that is hidden in this humor.

All of us can probably recall incidents in our lives that were funny and which made us feel good. And that seems to be one of the most important

aspects of humor—it gives us pleasure, even if it does so often in rather complicated ways. We even seem to derive pleasure figuring out how humor gives us pleasure.

Why We Laugh

Humor is a subject that has attracted the attention and interest of some of our greatest minds, from Aristotle and Kant to Bergson and Freud. It has also fascinated and played an important part in the work of our greatest writers such as Cervantes, Shakespeare, Moliere, Swift and Twain. One could cite many others.

Yet, curiously, after thousands of years spent trying to understand humor, there is still a great deal of controversy about what humor is or why something is funny. There are, however, some important theories on this matter which I would like to discuss here. I will start with *superiority* theories.

For Aristotle, comedy (and I will use the terms humor and comedy interchangeably, though comedy is, technically speaking, a literary form) is based on "an imitation of men worse than the average," of people who are "ridiculous." Hobbes, in a classic formulation, carried the same idea a bit further. As he put it in *The Leviathan*, "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."

Hobbes was primarily a political philosopher and author of the classic book *The Leviathan*. It might seem a bit strange for a political philosopher to speculate about humor, but the relationship between humor and power is one that has attracted a considerable amount attention in recent years. That is because we now can see that humor can be a subtle and powerful means of social control by dominant elements in society. And it is, at the same time, a force for resistance by subordinate elements in society. It is only natural, then, that Hobbes, being a philosopher of power, was interested in humor and its utility for those in power. (The relationship between humor and power will be discussed in more detail in various chapters of the book.)

In addition to the matter of superiority, Hobbes also mentions the importance of timing—the sudden glory that is based on a sudden conception. This is an important insight.

A farmer and a professor shared a seat on a train. They found it hard to converse so, to while away the time, the professor suggested they play a game of riddles for a dollar a game. "That's not fair," said the farmer. "I'll play you a dollar against your fifty cents, then," said the professor. "Okay," said the farmer. "You go first," said the professor. The farmer thought for a minute and then said, "what animal has three legs when it walks and two when it flies?" The professor thought for a moment, and then said "I give up." He handed the farmer a dollar. "What's the answer?" asked the professor. "I don't know," said the farmer, handing the professor fifty cents.

A little black girl smears her face with white cold cream. She runs to her mother in the kitchen saying "Mommy, mommy, look at me." Her mother tells her to wipe the cold cream off her face. She then finds her father who tells her the same thing. Upset and pouting she goes to the bathroom, thinking, "I haven't been white for more than a couple of minutes and I already hate two niggers."

There is another theory that is probably the most important and most widely accepted of the explanations of humor. This is the *incongruity* theory of humor which argues that all humor involves some kind of a difference between what one expects and what one gets. The term "incongruity" has many different meanings—inconsistent, not harmonious, lacking propriety and not conforming, so there are a number of possibilities hidden in the term. Incongruity theories involve the intellect, though they may not seem to at first sight— for we have to recognize an incongruity before we can laugh at one (though this recognition process takes place very quickly and is probably done subconsciously).

Incongruity theorists would argue that superiority theories are really special forms of incongruity. Thus, the jokes about the farmer and professor and the little black girl really turn on incongruities, reflected in the punch line, and not superiority, per se.

One of the more interesting and controversial theories of humor stems from the work of Freud. The *psychoanalytic* theory of humor argues that humor is essentially masked aggression (often of a sexual nature) which gives us gratifications we desperately crave. As Freud wrote in his classic book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, "and here at last we can understand what it is that jokes achieve in the service of their purpose. They make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way" (1963, 101).

In the case of smutty jokes, Freud tells us, we get pleasure because women will not tolerate "undisguised sexuality," so we mask our sexual aggressiveness by humor. We also derive pleasure camouflaging our aggression and hostility (and thus evading the strictures of our superegos) or regressing to child-like stages, among other things.