

Marxism for Dummies Harpo's silence is golden

The Anatomy of Harpo Marx

By Wayne Koestenbaum University of California Press, \$29.95

CINEMA HAS ALWAYS BEEN IN COMPETITION WITH THE WORD, no more so than in that particularly fraught genre of “film writing.” While of course one can write with film (as in the film or video essay), thus avoiding a medium of description potentially ill-suited to its object, there still remain very good reasons to write *about* film or write *through* film. However, there are only two plausible strategies for one to do so successfully. First: destroy the object. If a film writer is to avoid slavishness, dogmatism, or *USA Today*-style ticket-stub cheer-leading, film must not be a sacred object, approached with fanboy reverence. Second (and perhaps antithetically to the first strategy): one must be responsible to the object. Writing can easily get into its own self-perpetuating rut, thus blinding the writer to phenomena that don't respond to the pull of black letter.

In *The Anatomy of Harpo*, Wayne Koestenbaum remarkably manages to do both. Steering between the Scylla of idolizing, promotional dreck and the Charybdis of academic necrosis, he takes on a topic that requires subtlety and irreverence at the same time. His serial decomposition of the Marx Brothers' oeuvre is suitably abusive toward these holy relics of classical Hollywood comedy, queering Harpo (somewhat reluctantly) and deposing Groucho from his position of King Brother. Yet as an amanuensis of the mute, Koestenbaum is not without his own silence of wonder. By constraining his analysis to Harpo glimmers—traces of his on-screen presence unencumbered by plot—he attempts to communicate pure rapture without the “foam of commentary.” The book is a marvelous, almost uncanny follow-up to *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*, using similar techniques to build fragmentary insights around phenomena that escape alphabetism: in the earlier book, the pure sound of the opera singer, and here the soundless voids that Harpo carves out for himself and his viewers. By rewriting Groucho as a sinister usurper of language energies, and promoting Chico and Harpo as the affective center—perhaps even the primary love interest—of the Marx Brothers franchise, he is neither “ruining” these movies nor engaging in the glibness of fan fiction. Rather, Koestenbaum's crawl through the gestural economy of these films guarantees (à la Barthes' *S/Z*) that his is the most accurate and responsible reading—espousing Barthes' “science of the singular” at the ur-origins of the bromance.

But let us not, in this transvaluation of brothers, assume Harpo to be a naïf. He is still, after all, a screen star; his silence, the silence

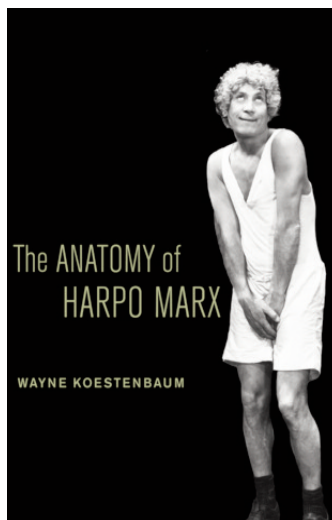
of pure image, will always trump ours in the audience. “Stars mar us,” Koestenbaum writes, “we receive vicarious illumination, but they outshine and therefore humiliate us by reminding us of our nugatory status as nonparticipants in screen existence. Let's revise the public discourse that considers us vultures, feeding on celebrity carrion; stars damage us by colonizing our consciousness and by persuading us that being cinema-worthy is the only way to shine.” Thus, Koestenbaum enacts a little writerly revenge on Harpo, albeit guiltily. We owe no debt to cinema. Cinema owes *us* for our role as dutiful cogs (for our promoting, our downloading; it owes us for our *love*). Consequently, I was expecting that Koestenbaum

intended to truly turn the tables on this discourse, reenergizing “film writing” as a type of work that has been in much disrepair. His brand of scholarship perhaps is, or was (were it not for two decades of the culture wars), in the best position to do just that.

So I was annoyed that Koestenbaum does not follow through with another way to shine, does not show the way forward for public intellectuals, artistic critics, queer academics, or any other Other you'd care to promote in this unequivocally melancholic moment for writers of all stripes. Instead, he engages in all manner of academic self-loathing. Whenever he mentions a prominent philosophical figure or term, he performs a mock recoil—a Gookie, in the vocabulary of Harpo—which tends to pathologize his own smarts (conversely, references from high culture such as ballet or opera are treated as natural emanations of his intelligence). “This chapter will avail itself of several theoretical allusions, but don't be alarmed” runs one warning. Yet the whole book is an extended riff on themes from Althusser, Lacan, Barthes, and Benjamin, and I very much doubt that anyone reading it isn't already in on these

associations. This aversion toward his own theoretical underpinnings doesn't make things easy for the rest of us lower down in the academic and publishing food chain; for that matter, it doesn't help allay the running-scared vibe of the humanities in general.

What makes *Anatomy*, regardless, a great achievement is that his egghead self-loathing could be considered part of what we've paid to see. As Koestenbaum writes, “We aspire to the asymptotic Book, which we can never attain . . . where speechlessness might make itself at home.” How one paradoxically undoes a book in the midst of writing one is the performance we want to see—and which may overshadow that of Harpo without, regretfully, the possibility of outshining. □



Koestenbaum steers between the Scylla of idolizing, promotional dreck and the Charybdis of academic necrosis.

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