FILM

I Me Mime

Wayne Koestenbaum's wide-ranging homage to a silent movie star

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THE ANATOMY OF HARPO MARX BY WAYNE KOESTENBAUM BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS. 336 PAGES. $30.

"Originally I intended to write a book about Harpo's relation to history and literature," remarks Wayne Koestenbaum on the first page of his fittingly zany, aphoristic, and meandering study of the great mime of Marx Brothers fame. "A tiny chapter on Harpo and Hegel. A tiny chapter on Harpo and Marx. A tiny chapter on Harpo and Stein. A tiny chapter on Harpo and Hitler." That idea didn't stick. Plan B, we are told, was a novella, *The Pillow Book of Harpo Marx*: "The narrator, Harpo, was a queer Jewish masseur who lived in Variety Springs, New York, and whose grandparents had starred in vaudeville with Sophie Tucker." That approach, too, got tossed. For plan C, the one that yielded *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx*, Koestenbaum attempts "a blow-by-blow annotation of Harpo's onscreen actions. My aim? Assemblage. Homage. Imitation. Transcription. Dilation."

This may sound like a tall order, and it is. Yet Koestenbaum, whose books include *Jackie Under My Skin: Interpreting an Icon* (1995) and *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993), rises to the occasion. The act he performs—the book is, on so many levels, about performance—comes off as a potent and idiosyncratic mix of film analysis and autobiography, a series of interpretive gestures that rely as much on his critical as on his confessional reflexes, pairing well-wrought epigrammatic observations with recurrent dream transcriptions. "The foundation of my technique," he notes about a third of the way through, "is digressiveness, which means I'm a joker. According to Freud, jokes protect thoughts from conscious criticism. He described the joke's libidinous ease, its shortcuts, the pleasure it takes in weaving incommensurables together, in behaving like a combination of a lap-dancer (I'll grope anyone who pays me) and a flâneur (I'll get excited by anything I encounter on my urban stroll)."

As the arresting image of a lap-dancing flâneur may indicate, Koestenbaum's approach to Harpo makes for highly animated reading. The many digressions, whether unconscious criticism or criticism of the unconscious, are every bit as essential as the larger story of his subject. The ambient chaos, not to mention the perpetual anarchy and prankster sensibility, that often comes with Harpo's presence in film—the wonderful "switch tricks" (e.g., lifting his leg for a handshake) and role reversals—grants Koestenbaum the proper milieu in which to execute his own frolicsome readings. As he observes in his chapter on *A Night in Casablanca* (1946), intimating another affinity with the mischievous mime, "I specialize in pointing out perversities that others won't acknowledge." Just as Harpo relishes misbehaving and defying authority figures, slyly putting them into compromising positions, so, too, Koestenbaum derives great pleasure in amplifying Harpo's unspoken art. He internalizes his subject to such a degree that it's possible to read *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx* as a fiendish satire of conventional scholarship, lifting a leg instead of shaking hands with standard methods and academic norms.

The book devotes one chapter to each of the thirteen major films in which Harpo starred alongside brothers Groucho and Chico (and, in the early pictures, Zeppo). The pages present a string of prose snapshots, richly illustrated with several dozen screen grabs—a term whose semantic ambiguities and erotic undertones would seem to invite the kind of playful reading that Koestenbaum employs elsewhere. Similarly, each section falls beneath evocative subheadings, ranging from "Harpo Gives Himself Breasts" and "Harpo as Kissing Machine" to "Harpo's Butt Cleavage," and "Detachable Phallus: Why I Poach from Psychoanalysis."

From the outset, Koestenbaum recognizes the radical nature of his enterprise, "to steal a man from his native silence," as he puts it, "and transplant him into words." He's much less interested in the real man, Arthur (né Adolph) Marx, born in New York City in 1888, whose autobiography, *Harpo Speaks!* (1961), he cites only fleetingly, than in his screen persona and the seductive possibilities of interpretation or, perhaps, projection. Commenting on a scene from *The Cocoanuts* (1929) in which Harpo and Chico dance together, he avers, "Harpo's actions I choose to take queerly. Don't accuse me of outing anybody! I've never outed anyone in my life. I'm simply watching Harpo dance with a man." Koestenbaum retains a lavish measure of self-reflexivity throughout, zeroing in on the chosen flash points from Harpo's screen life—and on his anatomical features—and then cutting away to other matters percolating in his wildly associative, equally erudite mind. For instance, in his chapter on *The Big Store* (1941), Koestenbaum writes, "Sudden auditory hallucination: I hear Donna Summer sing, 'Last dance, last chance.' The fear that a detail doesn't belong in this book inspires me to insist that everything belongs. What's the point of 'book' if it can't include scraps? Isn't inclusiveness the point of the big store, a warehouse of points, some insufficiently pointed?" The author, in other words, grants himself carte blanche to include what he wishes. And so the book can be, by turns, exhilarating and maddening, illuminating and irksome.

Among the many guises of Koestenbaum's Harpo are the "Jewish fool," the silent mystic, a "Germanic naturist," a prophet of disaster, a phallus, or a delicious sucker: "I consider Harpo my lollipop, and I am forever licking him."

One exemplary reading, of the great beard-switching scene in *A Night at the Opera* (1935), appears under the heading "Harpo as Mad Mohel."

> The sticky beard travels among men. Now Harpo has it. But he passes it to a dignitary by hugging and kissing him. If you raze a man's authority—with scissors or scapegoating—you steal his beard. The beard is the hot potato that no one wants. Take my false beard, my Jewish stain. Take my wife. Fact: borscht-belt headliner Henny Youngman married into my maternal grandmother's family. Kinship binds me to funny Jewry. So many circumcision plots! Snip, snip: I write you, young Jewish boy, into your historic identity. Harpo is a mohel gone mad.

Given the heavy reliance on psychoanalysis, and on Borscht Belt humor, the deep focus on circumcision should perhaps come as little surprise. But that doesn't mean that it's immune from overdetermination: "Much about the Marx Brothers can be gleaned from their off-kilter ties," Koestenbaum writes in his chapter on *Room Service* (1938). "A tie is a circumcision motto, a trace of foresaken skin." But isn't a tie sometimes just a tie? Koestenbaum seems to recognize the tunnel vision that can result from pursuing his obsessions too doggedly, admitting at one point, "I've been reading too much Lacan."

In the main, his interpretations tend toward abstraction or discursive detour. He draws his ideas, some more opaque than others, from a catalogue of Western thinkers (especially Barthes and Benjamin, while the epigraphs used to open each chapter range from John Cage and Nietzsche through Elfriede Jelinek and Julia Kristeva), applying them with a poet's sensitivity to language and a comp-lit professor's penchant for theorizing the ordinary. Examining the famous mirror scene in *Duck Soup* (1933), in which Harpo shadows each of Groucho's movements, gestures, and facial expressions (a scene that was hilariously updated by Harpo and Lucille Ball on *I Love Lucy*), Koestenbaum insists, "Harpo wants to erase his own presence—but also to intensify it through doubling. Harpo contains a fold, like a creased page. Eager to find ambiguous indentations in matteness, I invaginate reality by making it not simple." Was this perhaps originally meant for a tiny chapter on Harpo and Heidegger? Riffing later on the formal limitations of audience, Koestenbaum remarks, "I'm an egghead, writing for other eggheads. Anti-intellectualism is rampant in the United States. The interpreter counts for naught."

Far lighter and more playful, replete with interpretive *jouissance*, are the many dream transcriptions—"evidence I can't omit from my pillow book," as he puts it early on—that he incorporates. Under the subheading "Why Dreams Must Be Part of Serious Thinking," in his chapter on *Animal Crackers* (1930), he observes, "I dreamt that Barbra Streisand, whose Jewfro in *A Star Is Born* looks like Harpo's wig, dictated her memoirs while riding in a limo." Or, in his chapter on *Monkey Business* (1931), he opens with the following lines: "Dream: Harpo starred in a Yiddish film, a talkie. He spoke! His voice was soft and gravelly. Also dreamt I steamed an artichoke. Moral: I choke on art. Have you met Arthur Choke, a quiet klutz his friends call Arty?"

Readers seeking a linear account, a faithful chronicle, of the life and career of Harpo Marx will likely be exasperated. Those willing to allow Koestenbaum to indulge in frequent personal asides, promiscuous readings, and his own anarchic transgressions vis-à-vis conventional scholarship and film criticism may well be dazzled. I myself fall somewhere in between. While I appreciate the irreverent wit, the theoretical acumen, and the intermittent lyricism of Koestenbaum's prose, some of the self-consciously naughty dream excursus and other extended moments of autoanalysis—when the primary focus tilts toward the author more than his subject—made me want to re-create one of Harpo's signature expressions, "throwing a Gookie" ("crossed eyes, bloated cheeks, protruding tongue"). □

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