



# HUMOUR, IRONY, AND THE GROTESQUE IN LITERARY NEO-AVANT-GARDES

Vienna, 13-15 November 2025



## THURSDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2025

**14:00-18:00 – presentations, discussion, and coffee break**

Chair: Roland Innerhofer (Universität Wien)

14:00-14:10 Welcome and opening remarks

14:10-15:20 Cognitive Perspectives on Humour in Neo-Avant-Garde Literature  
Lars Bernaerts (Ghent University) and Thomas Eder (Universität Wien)

15:20-16:00 'It's a joke, isn't it?' Humour and Irony in Selected Works of Liberature  
Katarzyna Bazarnik (Jagiellonian University Krakow)

16:00-16:20 COFFEE AND TEA

16:20-17:00 Humor as strategy in Elfriede Gerstl's poetry  
Laura Tezarek (Universität Wien)

17:00 Performance of Visible and Invisible Poetry  
Zenon Fajfer (transl. Katarzyna Bazarnik, Jagiellonian University Krakow)

19:00 Ann Cotten at Shakespeare & Company, Sterngasse 2, 1010 Vienna

**FRIDAY 14 NOVEMBER 2025**

**10:00-12:00 – presentations & discussion**

Chair: Brigitte Félix (Université de Paris 8)

10:00-10:40 Laughter in a Strange Land. The Grotesque Semantics of Hugo Raes' SF-Stories  
Ruben Vanden Berghe (Tilburg University)

10:40-11:20 Grotesque aesthetic emotions? Bodies, deformation, abjection  
Johanna Öttl (Universität Wien)

11:20-12:00 The Taste of Transgression: Poetry, Food, and the Neo-Avant-Garde  
Michel Delville (Université de Liège)

**LUNCH**

**13:00-18:00 – presentations, discussion, and coffee break**

13:00-13:40 Grotesque Letter Grids? Considering the (para)texts of Georges Perec's  
Alphabets

Jordan Lee Schnee (Freie Universität Berlin)

13:40-14:20 Funny hydraulics – on a metaphoric aquifer  
Ann Cotten

14:20-14:40 Concluding remarks

14:40-15:00 COFFEE AND TEA

15:00-18:00 ENAG board meeting

Curation of the anthology: Inge Arteel, Lars Bernaerts, Vincent Broqua, Michel Delville, Thomas Eder, Brigitte Félix, Roland Innerhofer, Ilse Logie, Sabine Müller, Claus Telge, Kris Van Heuckelom

**SATURDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2025**

**10:00-13:00 – ENAG board meeting**

1. Anthology
2. OELN
3. Next meeting
4. COST application

## ABSTRACTS

### **'It's a joke, isn't it?' Humour and irony in selected works of liberature**

Katarzyna Bazarnik (Jagiellonian University Krakow)

Liberature can be variously described as a multimodal, book-bound literary genre, in which both text and its material form are equally expressive and meaningful (Fajfer 2010, Bazarnik 2016), and as a poetics (Przybyszewska 2015), or literary movement associated with the contemporary Polish neo-avant-garde, in particular with Zenon Fajfer, who coined the term (Ranocchi 2021). Neither humour, nor irony have been discussed with regard to it yet, although comic, or satirical aspects are evident in many liberatic works. Fajfer's *Spoglądając Przez Ozonową Dziurę* (2004), a poem printed on a transparent foil sheet placed in a recycled vodka bottle, has been referred to as a joke (...), or the associated with Dadaist poetics (Koniuszy 2024). In many (proto)liberatic works, humour is prominent, and often specifically reliant on the books' materiality. B.S. Johnson's (proto)liberatic novel *House Mother Normal* (1971) is subtitled "A Geriatric Comedy" (though its content is hardly comical), while Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* (1961) surprises readers with both its experimental form and absurd humour of the sonnets (not to mention Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* marble page).

My presentation will provide an overview of multimodal comic elements appearing in liberatic works, with the special focus on contemporary Polish authors (Zenon Fajfer, Radosław Nowakowski, Tomasz Kalita). Secondly, I will explore the relations between humour and irony in the discussed examples, and reflect on their rhetorical or discursive functions.

#### **References:**

- Bazarnik, Katarzyna. *Liberature: a Book-bound Genre*. Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2016.
- Fajfer, Zenon. *Liberature or Total Literature. Collected Essays 1999–2009*. Edited and translated by K. Bazarnik. Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010.
- Fajfer, Zenon. *Spoglądając przez ozonową dziurę* [Detec Ozone Whole Nearby]. Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2004.
- Johnson, Brian Stanley. *House Mother Normal: a Geriatric Comedy*. London: Collins, 1971.

Koniuszy, Przemysław. «Doświadczanie jako eksperymentowanie. *Spoglądając Przez Ozonową Dziurę* Zenona Fajfera jako liberackie dzieło eksperymentalne», *Teksty Drugie* [Online], 5 | 2024. Published online: 30 Dec 2024. Accessed 25 Sept 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/td/30482>

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Przybyszewska, Agnieszka. *Liberackość dzieła literackiego* [Liberariness of the Literary Work]. Łódź: University of Łódź Press, 2015.

Queneau, Raymond. *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1961.

### **Cognitive Perspectives on Humour in Neo-Avant-Garde Literature**

Lars Bernaerts (Ghent University) and Thomas Eder (Universität Wien)

The workshop opens with a double presentation, in which we offer theoretical perspectives on humour in neo-avant-garde literatures, building on cognitive literary studies. In the first part, Lars Bernaerts will discuss grotesque and absurdist short stories called ‘paraprose’, written by the Belgian author Gust Gils (1924-2002), to demonstrate how incongruity determines the cognitive workings of humour. Based on this general framework, he will then reflect upon the potential of frame theory and blending theory to illuminate humour in neo-avant-garde fiction. In the second part, Thomas Eder will introduce the theory of predictive processing as an approach to humour. His examples show how readerly predictions are thwarted, rerouted, and led astray in the work by the Wiener Gruppe, in particular Gerhard Rühm and Dieter Roth.

### **Funny hydraulics – on a metaphoric aquifer**

Ann Cotten

Why can the transferral of characteristic kinetic dynamics from one domain to another make us giggle – and what does that do with our thinking generally? My talk concerns a certain group of structural metaphors that are native to the known universe even beyond languages in a

strict sense, by sharing indexical semantics with nonlinguistic phenomena. Skeuomorphic indexicality can of course also be used for tricks and illusions, the mere effect of sense-making and mock insights, impressions and expectations of closure and finality and so forth – a massive contribution to rhetoric and poetic means beyond propositional sentences and grammar. Focusing on the physics of liquids (humours) as one aspect sometimes emulated in the kinetic dynamics of experimental texts, I may or may not be able to discover a particular relation between the slapstick of playing with liquidity and the poetic potentials and of irony.

### **The Taste of Transgression: Poetry, Food, and the Neo-Avant-Garde**

Michel Delville (University of Liège/CIPA/UR Traverses)

This paper explores the intersections of food, poetry, neo-avant-garde performance, and the grotesque body through the lens of Eat Art. Beginning with Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's edible costumes and Marinetti's *Futurist Cookbook*, it traces how food has become a radical medium of artistic and poetic experimentation. Eat Art performers such as Carolee Schneemann, Paul McCarthy, Karen Finley, Janine Antoni, and Alicia Rios foreground the body's porous boundaries by smearing, chewing, and staging food as both nourishment and waste.

### **Grotesque aesthetic emotions? Bodies, deformation, abjection**

Johanna Öttl (Universität Wien)

Gerhard Rühm's and Oswald Wiener's *\_Kind und Welt\_* (*\_Child and World\_*, 1958) consists of photos taken from magazines: showing dancing women, priests, children who are eating—and of images from a medical book depicting dead fetuses with malformations. The recontextualized material is unsettling and alienating and triggers feelings of disgust and abjection. Aesthetic feelings cover a broad spectrum, we can feel moved, fascinated, disgusted. Using *\_Kind und Welt\_* as a starting point, my paper will assess the role of abjection in the grotesque aesthetics of the avant-garde. Furthermore it will enquire, whether this conceptualisation of abjection can be the starting point for a description of an affective theory of the grotesque.

## **Grotesque Letter Grids? Considering the (para)texts of Georges Perec's Alphabets**

Jordan Lee Schnee (Freie Universität Berlin)

Georges Perec's poetry continues to enjoy less public and academic reception than his monumental works of prose. Nonetheless, it is significant in its own right and also sheds light on his more celebrated prose texts. The 1976 book *Alphabets* contains grotesque images by the artist Dado that crawl over the pages, sometimes overlapping with or actively interfering with the poems. The drawings are organic and figurative. This juxtaposes the highly formal, "heterogrammatic" grid technique Perec used to write the book. One reading, supported by other parts of Perec's work, would see the illustrations as visual translations of the text, encouraging a view of the letter as monstrous, grotesque, unstable. All of this contributes to Perec's project of what I have termed "exploding the alphabet" — his exploring and expanding the world and character of each letter.

## **Humor as strategy in Elfriede Gerstl's poetry**

Laura Tezarek (University of Vienna)

Elfriede Gerstl (1932–2009) is an often overlooked and under-researched writer of the Austrian neo-avant-garde. While having affinity with the Vienna Group's sense of humour in certain wordplays, such as laconic puns, most of Gerstl's poems are characterised rather by an underlying ironic attitude, understatement, and a strong sense of self-deprecation. Irony and dry wit are, for example, employed as strategies against realism, insulating her writings from the then prevailing pathos and sentimentality.

## **Laughter in a Strange Land. The Grotesque Semantics of Hugo Raes' SF-Stories**

Ruben Vanden Berghe (Tilburg University)

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, neo-avant-garde (NAG) authors from the Low Countries, such as Hugo Raes, Sybren Polet and Lidy van Marissing, increasingly incorporated tropes, themes, and forms from science fiction into their literary experimentation. For these writers, SF offered a novel framework to imagine societal, technological and ecological transformations – for better or for worse – thus enabling new ways of inciting as well as problematising the historical avant-garde’s ‘futural thrust’ (Bru 2018, 233).

The aesthetic and infrastructural entanglements between NAG and SF are particularly evident in the literary oeuvre of Belgian author Hugo Raes (1929-2013). As co-founder of the avant-garde magazine *Het Kahier* (1953) and member of the Antwerp-based collective *De Nevelvlek*, Raes played a central role in post-war literary innovation in Flanders. His fiction—ranging from surrealist short stories to experimental novels—also reveals a sustained engagement with science fiction as a mode of speculative imagination.

This paper focuses on Raes’ short story ‘Een zonsopgang’ (‘A sunrise’) as a case study in the nexus of NAG aesthetic strategies and SF narrative and stylistic forms. First published in *Bankroet van een charmeur* (*Bankruptcy of a Charmer*, 1967), a hybrid collection featuring SF, prose poetry, an experimental radio play, and creative art criticism, the story’s later inclusion in English-language SF anthologies and magazines (alongside New Wave authors such as J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock) exemplifies its transnational and transgeneric mobility.

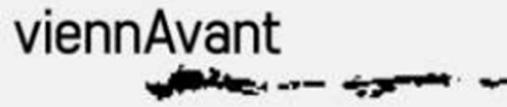
Through a close reading of *A Sunrise*, I explore how Raes mobilizes word play and generic subversion to effectuate the story’s grotesque and speculative imaginary of heterosexual erotic and sexual relations. In doing so, the story exemplifies what Darko Suvin terms SF’s “attitude of estrangement” (2016, 18), aligning the transformative poetics of the neo-avant-garde with SF’s *novum*: its capacity to narrate and stylistically embed futural possibility.

## ORGANISATION

The workshop is a collaboration of the Universität Wien and the research network ENAG. It is made possible by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO, funding number W000222N).



ENAG is an FWO-funded research network that further includes CIPA (Université de Liège), OBAwa (Jagiellonian University in Kraków), SEL (Ghent University and Vrije Universiteit Brussels), Transcrit (Université Paris 8), and ViennAvant (Universität Wien).



## VENUE

The [Jura Soyfer-Saal](#) is located in the Institute for Theatre, Film and Media Studies, Hofburg, Batthyanystrasse, 1010 Vienna. If you enter the Michaelerkuppel from Michaelerplatz, Batthyanystrasse is on the right. Then go up to the second floor.

## HOTEL

### Hotel Lucia

Hütteldorfer Str. 79

1150 Wien

<https://www.lucia-hotel.at/>