HUMOUR *VERSUS* DOMINATION – MECHTILDE LICHNOWSKY, A FEMALE KNIGHT AGAINST WINDMILLS?

Anne Martina Emonts
University of Madeira, Portugal

Abstract

There is nothing more serious than speaking about humour. Different senses of humour have separated cultures, for example the cultures of women and men, depending on the *Erkenntnisinteresse* of a specific research area. However, a common sense of humour has also unified people.

Humour in the forms of satire and caricature, has always been the strongest weapon to attack power. Mechtilde Lichnowsky (1897-1958), a multi-talented and intercultural character, aristocrat and enemy of any kind of domination, was a public figure and a well-known writer on the eve of World Wars I and II. Despite her importance, she has been overlooked in the literary canon because she used humour as a weapon in such a form, at that time considered inappropriate for an aristocratic Lady.

In my brief paper, I shall present a relevant *œuvre* in the European cultural context which has divided but also unified opinions.

Key words: Power; Gender; Humour; Satire; Caricature; Interculturalism.

In her book *Worte über Wörter*[1], published in 1949, though most of the texts were written during the thirties in exile, Mechtilde Lichnowsky (1879-1958) states:

> It is most deplorable, that the radio listeners' whistling and shouting loudly "for shame!" did not reach the ears of the so called 'speaker of the people'. [...] Where was that big laughter, why didn't it burst, releasing and saving us? .... (Lichnowsky 1949: 144)[2]

Of course this forgotten German writer is talking about Adolf Hitler's radio speeches, which were heard and commented on and ridiculed in a lot of German family abodes; Mechtilde Lichnowsky refused all her lifelong to pronounce Hitler's name. But in this case, humour and non-violent resistance seem to have failed their target.

---

[1] Engl. *Words on words*; all translations by Anne Martina Emonts.

[2] In original: "Es ist bedauerlich, daß Pfeifen und Pfuirufe des Hörers am Radio nicht zu den Ohren des sogenannten Volksredners dringen konnten. [...] Wo blieb das große Gelächter, warum setzte es nicht ein, erlösend und rettend?"

"*Mir fällt zu Hitler nichts ein*" ["Hitler doesn't bring anything to my mind"] - with these famous words the "apocalyptic satirist", as Edward Timms calls him (Timms 2005), Karl Kraus (1874-1936), a close friend of Mechtilde Lichnowsky, had started his extensive analysis of national socialism, *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht*, written in 1933 and published in 1952: Hitler was not even worthy of his satire.

Nonetheless, Dario Fo, winner of the Nobel Award for Literature in 1997, continues to believe in the subversive potential of humour:

> There is nothing more frightening to power, to any power, than laughter, smile and mockery. They are signs of critical spirit, fantasy, intelligence and the contrary of fanaticism. I did not go to the theatre to play Hamlet but with the conviction that I was a clown, a buffoon. (Fo n.d.)[3]

The winner of the Nobel Award for Literature in 2004, Elfriede Jelinek, complains in an interview that her sense of humour is not understood in Germany: "A lot of Germans do not understand my jokes, they do not find it funny at all. I have got the feeling, that, in Germany, I am confronted with a completely empty field of reception."[4] She has had to face the same problem, in as much as Mechtilde Lichnowsky a hundred years before: despite writing in German, her sense of humour seems strange to her own country.

Let us look at it from the opposite cline: To this day, a forgotten female writer in Germany, Mechtilde Lichnowsky is still known in Austria. My thesis is: her multi-cultural attitude and experience – as well as her sense of humour – are welcome in the multi-cultural Austria, marked by the multi-national politics of the Habsburgs. Yet, it seems to be less welcome in – if I may say so – the rather mono-cultural Prussia.

There is nothing more serious than speaking about humour. And there is nothing more fatal than taking seriously a text which was meant to be funny. We are dealing with so-called inter-cultural critical incidents which may lead to serious conflicts. Elfriede Jelinek is of the opinion that one should share the same "cultural dung" to understand humour (Jelinek 2004).

But let me tell you who Mechtilde Lichnowsky was, i.e., the forgotten female humorist. She was born as a member of high nobility, as Mechtilde von Arco Zinneberg, grand-grand-daughter of the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria

---

[3] „Die Macht, und zwar jede Macht, fürchtet nichts mehr als das Lachen, das Lächeln und den Spott. Sie sind Anzeichen für kritischen Sinn, Phantasie, Intelligenz und das Gegenteil von Fanatismus. Ich bin nicht mit der Idee zum Theater gegangen, Hamlet zu spielen, sondern mit der Ansicht, ein Clown zu sein, ein Hanswurst." „Dario Fo" in Wikipedia, Die freie Enzyklopädie,<http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dario_Fo&oldid=39120234>(January 6, 2008).

[4] "Viele Deutsche verstehen auch meinen Witz überhaupt nicht, die finden das nicht komisch. Ich habe das Gefühl, ich stoße vor allem in Deutschland in ein vollkommen leeres Rezeptionsfeld, in eine Rezeptionswüste." Elfriede Jelinek, "Ich renne mit dem Kopf gegen die Wand und verschwinde", interview by Rose-Marie Gropp und Hubert Spiegel, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 November 2004, 35f.

and grandchild of a Portuguese Countess, Matilde de Oriola (1827-1899). Married to Prince Carlmax Lichnowsky, whose ancestor Carl II (1761-1814) had been a close friend and Maecenas of Ludwig van Beethoven, she was proud of having made even Queen Mum laugh, as she writes to her friend Hermann Graf Keyserling. It should have been very difficult to amuse Her Royal Highness at that time, when Mechtilde Lichnowsky accompanied Carlmax as the wife of the German Ambassador in London from 1912 to 1914. Indeed, she shared the cultural dung of the British politics at the highest level, and she returned to London as soon as she could, in 1946, but she never got back to her home country. The years between World War I and II were spent in different cultural environments, with homes in several countries: in her Czech castles, in her flat in Berlin, in Vienna with Karl Kraus, in London or in Munich with old friends, or several years in the South of France amongst other exiled German writers. She writes in three languages – German, French and English – and she laughs in – at least – three languages.

Indeed as a girl, she had decorated her letters with caricatures, which she calls "images of thoughts" [*Gedankenbilder*], and she wrote and designed two little books, which remind of Wilhelm Busch's style but which were never published. Her humour had always lived from the connection (or should I say short-cut?) between writing (text) and designing (image).

Figure 1. "Boef à la mode mit Knödl", Letter to her sister Helene Harrach, n.d.[5]

[5] Courtesy DLA Marbach, Germany, Nachlass Mechtilde Lichnowsky, Nr. 817662/3.

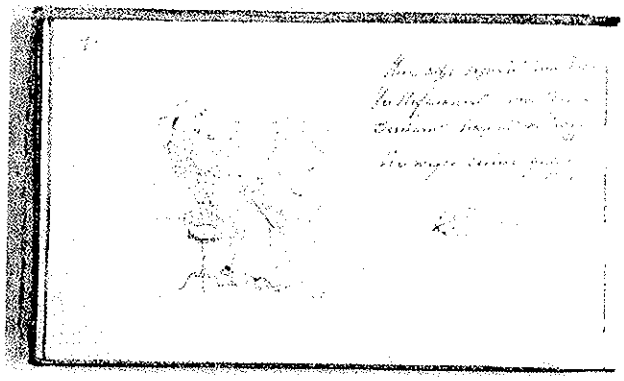

Figure 2. Mechtilde Lichnowsky's early cartoon "Jagolo", the badger dog.[6]

Colleagues are her target, like for the anarchist writer Peter Hille (1854-1904) in his "Sea-poem". She takes his words in earnest, literally, and designs the corresponding "images of thought". The result you see in the following image: "Poured out soft lines/ greeting, murmuring palms and pine-trees/ flourished, rose breasts/ smiling sun-striped coast." Words and poetry are not innocent: the boy should listen to a text and <u>see</u> [perceive] what it says.

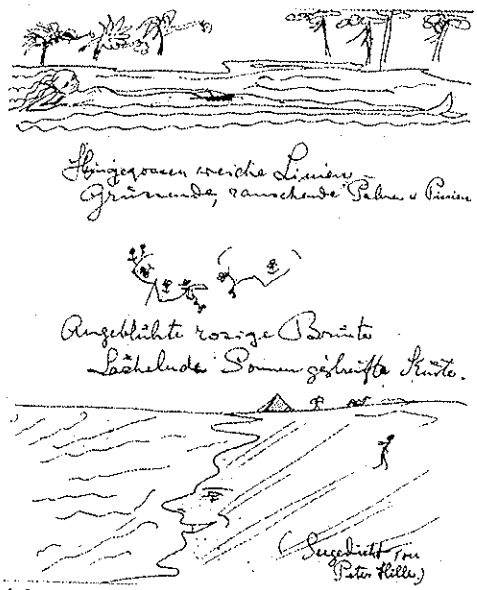

Figure 3. Mechtilde Lichnowsky's humorous "translation" of Peter Hille's "Sea-Poem" [*Seegedicht*][7]

[6] Courtesy by DLA Marbach, Germany, Nachlass Mechtilde Lichnowsky, n.d.
[7] Letter to her sister Helene Harrach, n.d., DLA, Nachlass Mechtilde Lichnowsky, 81.7662.

In the twenties, her most productive time, even the extremely critical and exclusive Karl Kraus accepted her as caricaturist for his famous *Die Fackel* [The Torch]; of course nobody should know who was hiding behind the pseudonym "Cristiane Dark"; a princess should not make such serious jokes in public.

But her strongest humorous weapon was language itself, or better say, language criticism. Mechtilde Lichnowsky criticizes people's spoken language; she points out the ridicule, absurdity and emptiness of people's daily talk. She exposes the daily lack of logic, revealed by people's language output, to laughter, especially the language of the "*Fachmann*", the language of those people who regard themselves as specialists or experts in a certain subject, is the target of Mechtilde Lichnowsky's attacks.

Let me just refer to one typical episode from Mechtilde Lichnowsky's novel, *Geburt* [Birth], issued in 1921. It is typical for her strategy of humour and typical for one of her main subjects: the ridiculous division of the world according to one's gender: male or female:

> Little Albert has accompanied his aunt to buy a game. The aunt advises: "You'll see, the first they'll ask me is: For boys or for girls?" She was right. It was the first sentence we heard. People are like this: before knowing the clients' wishes [...] they ask for their gender (Lichnowsky 1954: 150).

The absurd and comic odyssey through the different departments of the shop, all divided into boys' and girls' areas, finally ends when the aunt is fed up and asks for a game for "hermaphrodites between ten and thirteen years" (Lichnowsky1954: 151).

In her most important and best known book, *Der Kampf mit dem Fachmann* [The struggle with the specialist], issued in 1924, she brings her humorous language criticism to perfection. Mechtilde Lichnowsky presents, for example, a dialogue between a sales girl (the 'specialist' for hats) and herself, trying to buy a hat for her nephew. "I want a dark felt hat of 53 centimetres of circumference for a child", she says to the salesgirl. She has measured her nephew's head and knows exactly what she wants. Of course, the salesgirl asks: "How old?" Useless are the buyer's arguments that the circumference of the nephew's head is really 53 centimetres: the salesgirl insists on the importance of age, and an absurd and comical dialogical fight between both ladies starts, one insisting on the simple size, the other on age as measure (Lichnowsky 1924: 17-19). Discourse is revealed as inadequate, not corresponding to the communicative aim.

And also the human hats themselves are inadequate, as Mechtilde Lichnowsky shows us in her caricatures. Nurses' caps, for example, are neither suitable nor useful, simply ridiculous, in as much as other cooks' costumes, or ladies with feather hats or generals. A special target for Mechtilde Lichnowsky's satire is the specialist in a uniform [*Der doppelreihige Fachmann*]; here she reveals her main issue: unmasking the possessor's discursive power.

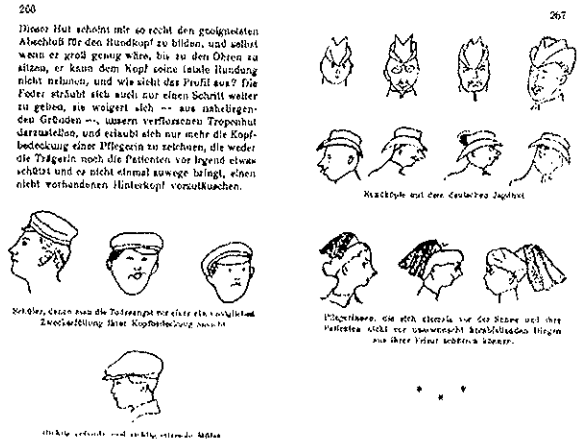

Figure 4. Mechtilde Lichnowsky's caricatures make part of her text (Lichnowsky 1924: 266)

Her attempt to amuse the German public with some kind of German limericks and fitting designs fails: the book (*Halb & Halb* [Half & Half] 1927) is misread as a book for children as if it was no fun at all. The German cultural dung is not prepared for sophisticated inter-cultural innovation. Anyway, Mechtilde Lichnowsky continued to write, attacking, satirizing until she died in 1958, in London. One of her best caricatures is decisively political, showing William II, Emperor of Germany until 1918.

Figure 5[8]. William II

We are not really surprised that an anti-Nazi humorist female, voluntarily exiled is forgotten by the literary canon. In the 20th century there was a tendency to diminish humour-genres to 'minor literature'. Exclusion of humorous, powerfully-critical discourse is but new; it seems to be somehow easier to forget writers who expose

[8] The caricature appeared in December 1922 in Karl Kraus's *Die Fackel* (published under the pseudonym "Chr. Dark") with the title "*Die Glorie*" [The Glory].

discursive power to laughter, especially if they are multi-cultural, multi-talented and female. Power does not forgive double crossers.

What would have happened if Germany's (and Austria's) majority had read and understood both Mechtilde Lichnowsky's and Karl Kraus' texts? Would it have made any sense to denounce the ruin of human communication? They could not change history, but this fact is still no argument for a pessimistic point of view, that there is no use for humour against political domination. On the contrary, analysing processes of exclusion through discourse, because humour and satire hurt the right people, tells us a lot about power itself: it is an analysis of the discourse of power, which can be recalled later and educate young people, for example.

With Mechtilde Lichnowsky's self-ironic representation as a rotten cat, in a letter to Franz Schoenberner, written from her exile in France, I wish to finish and illustrate the title of my paper:

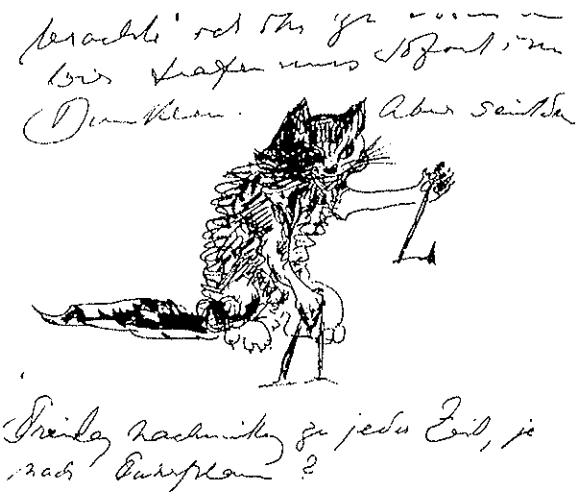

Figure 6. Letter by Mechtilde Lichnowsky to Franz Schoenberner, 11.4.1937[9]

As usual, the caricaturist hides her initials in the drawing. Yes, Mechtilde Lichnowsky is the female knight fighting against windmills. Humour cannot exist without the tragic or the serious. There is no humour without melancholy – in all human cultures. Maybe we should be just a little more attentive to modern Don Quixotes. I simply wanted to present a forgotten German female humorist and point out some political and powerfully critical dimensions of humour in Mechtilde Lichnowsky's work and life.

She taught me, as a German, among a lot of other things, first and foremost that there is one cross-cultural phenomenon for sure: we recognize evil, throughout the times, by its lack of humour.

---

[9] Courtesy Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, California, Collection Franz Schoenberner, Box number 4, Folder ID: Lichnowsky.

References

Dario Fo (n.d.) *Wikipedia, Die freie Enzyklopädie.* Retrieved 6. January 2008, from http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dario_Fo&oldid=39120234.

Kraus, K. (1922, December). *Die Fackel.*

Jelinek, E. (2004, November 8). Ich renne mit dem Kopf gegen die Wand und verschwinde [Gespräch mit Rose-Marie Gropp und Hubert Spiegel anläßlich der Verleihung des Nobelpreises für Literatur 2004]. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 261*, P.35f.

Lichnowsky, M. (1921). *Geburt.* Berlin: Erich Reiss.

Lichnowsky, M. (1924). *Der Kampf mit dem Fachmann.* Wien, Leipzig: Jahoda & Siegel.

Lichnowsky, M. (1949). *Worte über Wörter.* Wien: Berglandverlag.

Lichnowsky, M. (1954). *Geburt.* Esslingen: Bechtle Verlag.

Timms, E. (2005). *Karl Kraus, apocalyptic satirist. The post-war crisis and the rise of the Swastika.* Yale: Yale University Press.