

Call for Papers

Materiality Matters: Figurations of Comic Bodies and Things

Annual Conference of the [Network Comic Literacies](#) – *Kulturtechniken des Komischen (Cultural Techniques of Comedy)*

November 13–15, 2025 / Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) Essen, Germany

Keynote on Thursday, November 13, 2025: Oliver Double (University of Kent)

In comic figures such as clowns, amateurs, or spinsters, in the masks of the *commedia dell'arte* or in the pies thrown in slapstick, as well as in theatre, film, or text—comedy always manifests itself through bodies and things. The first annual conference of the network *Comic Literacies – Kulturtechniken des Komischen (Cultural Techniques of Comedy)* thus explores perspectives on the material dimensions of comedy and the comic. Discussing and comparing case studies from different contexts and disciplinary backgrounds, we aim to outline comic phenomena as constituted via cultural techniques that are shaped by the materiality of various cultural, corporeal, and media practices. In doing so, the conference draws special attention to acts of *figuration*: How can we conceptualize the staging of comic bodies and things as matters of design and formation?

When actions comically fail or take unconventional turns, relations between the ideal and the material are put to the test. It is also where the possibilities and the potential of bodies and things come into focus. Objects break, bodies lose control, they become “autonomous,” but then are subjected to centrifugal force and gravity—or somehow escape the laws of physics. The comic effects that erupt here point to comedy as a fleeting and dynamic event in space and time that is never repeated under the exact same conditions and that always arises in interaction with an audience (Müller-Schöll 2003; Roof 2018). Sometimes, just zooming in at the right moment to highlight materiality is enough to transform an object into a comic artifact. Much like social interactions that succeed not through rational decision-making but through the multisensory and material interplay of bodies and things (Alkemeyer 2008; Hirschauer 2015), comedy emerges through pre-reflective, embodied doing *in actu*.

In various ways, Cultural Studies have addressed how comedy is performed *with* and *through* bodies and things (Erdmann 2003; Müller-Kampel 2003; Lehmann 2011; Peters 2012; Velten 2017; Hennefeld 2018; Kling 2018). Expanding on this research, the conference will focus on the mediating functions of material corporeality and objecthood. It aims to respond to recent calls for a closer examination of comedy’s *tacit knowledge* (Wilkie 2020, xvii), i.e., the existence or lack of practically embodied sensory, experiential, and detail-oriented knowledge in the material production and figuration of comic bodies and things.

Whether the comic arises from a custard pie fight or a cacophonous honking concert (Krankenhagen 2024), we ask: What do materialities (fail to) express or process? Diabolical as it can be, comedy is often to be found in the details (Fluhrer 2015). How do bodies and things, by way of their quantity or quality, make themselves visible, audible, or tangible in comic ways? Comic techniques often directly (trans)form materialities, altering their semantic dimensions—e.g., when objects turn from commodities into tools, from fetishized objects into waste (Scholz/Vedder 2018), or when intense repetition shifts focus from content to form. Bodies and things may be recognized as comedic, they may prompt a knowing smile, but they may also be

perceived as funny in the sense of strange, even uncanny, as cringeworthy, or simply as “too close”, thereby transgressing the boundaries of comedy (Lockyer/Pickering 2005).

The conference invites case studies that explore the mediating function of materialities with regard to comic effects. Relevant questions include: How can we reconstruct acts of figuration in the production of comic bodies and things? How does comedy as a cultural technique draw on historically situated materialities? How do comic figurations produce epistemological uncertainty, tipping points or loss of control? And how can focussing on comedy’s praxeological knowledge bring forth new approaches to comedy?

Please submit abstracts (max. 500 words) and a short bio (max. 100 words) by **June 15, 2025**, to sarah.tober@kwi-nrw.de. The conference will be held on **November 13–15, 2025**, at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) Essen (Germany). We are pleased to announce **Oliver Double** (University of Kent) as keynote speaker. Participants will also attend an artistic performance at PACT Zollverein (<https://www.pact-zollverein.de/>, Performing Arts Choreographisches Zentrum NRW Tanzlandschaft Ruhr).

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