


1-24-2018

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Recommended Citation

Chemi, Tatiana (2018) "The Sunny Side of Academia (in the Shadow of its Darkest Side)," *Organizational Aesthetics*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, 18-20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/oa/vol7/iss1/3>

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The Sunny Side of Academia (in the Shadow of its Darkest Side)

Book review of *Academia Obscura: The Hidden Silly Side of Higher Education*. London: Unbound by Glen Wright (2017).

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Humour is a bloody serious matter. In 1964, preparing for the London production of his play *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett instructed actor Patrick Magee to get as many laughs as possible out of their production: "let's get as many laughs as we can out of this horrible mess".¹ This might as well have been Glen Wright's imperative in writing *Academia Obscura*, the "horrible mess" being our contemporary academic world.

Academia Obscura is more than a book. It is a knowledge and publishing project. As the publishing credits explain, this is part of a grassroots crowdfunding initiative. Unbound is a community founded by three writers who "believed there had to be a better deal for both writers and readers. On the Unbound website, authors share the ideas for the books they want to write directly with readers".² If enough support is collected from readers in advance pledges, Unbound will "produce a beautifully bound special subscribers' edition and distribute a regular edition and ebook whenever the books are sold, in shops and online".³ Rather than being hosted within a well-established or even academic (point- or impact-giving) publisher, the *Academia Obscura* initiative was started with the help of a collective of readers and supporters. Its author has pitched his idea to this community and the individual members have independently decided whether to support this specific book or not.

This book is based on a scholarly setback and on the author's systematic procrastination in completing his PhD dissertation. Every writer knows the struggle against postponing forces when one is immersed in a writing activity. Procrastination is achieved by a number of rather pleasurable activities, such as eating, snacking, dog-walking, cat-cuddling, doodling and the like. Procrastination opportunities have grown with social media, which offer a full-time opportunity for delaying writing. The author of *Academia Obscura* has turned this devilish tendency into a virtue, making of his messing about an alternative book project (alternative to writing the PhD, as well as to *serious* reports on contemporary academia).

Both projects, Unbound publishing and *Academia Obscura*, rely on old ideas. The former is acknowledged in the book itself, where the three Unbound founders mention Samuel Johnson's

¹ Story told by Ruby Cohn in 1973 (*Back to Beckett*. Princeton: P.U.P., p. 15).

² Dan, Justin and John, founders of Unbound in the initial pages of *Academia Obscura*, n.p.

³ Ibid.

dictionary as distinguished precedent for bottom-up funding. The latter is clearly a descendent of the Mediaeval tradition of Goliardia, the mocking practices of students that had a fundamental identity-building role in Western universities from the XII century onwards.⁴

Glen Wright claims to be a “sort of” academic. In reality, his personal web site shows his academic credits as a marine biologist and describes his interests in environmental law. He is currently Research Fellow in International Marine Policy at the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations, Paris. His PhD with the Australian National University “looks at national marine governance mechanisms in the context of ocean industrialisation, focusing specifically on the emerging marine renewable energy industry as a case study”.⁵

His Britishness (he was born in the Black Country, UK and currently lives in Paris, France) is apparent in the dry humoristic style, use of irony, parody, and absurdism. At the risk of committing literary blasphemy, I must confess that Glen Wright’s style makes me think of Laurence Sterne, especially *Tristan Shandy’s* paradoxical fireworks.

This book is a real enjoyment. It makes fun of academic practices, looking at them from *within*. Only a scholar could deride so successfully the practices of academic conferences (this part reminds me of David Lodge’s *Small World: An Academic Romance*, published in 1984 by Warner Books) or abstracts (the shorter abstracts being a one-word reply to the question formulated in the paper’s title). Only an inside view could provide the sharpest translation of academic slang into common language, exposing the gap between “what academics say” and “what they mean” (p. 117), for instance, translating “various sources” into “I forgot the name and author of that one paper” (ibid.). The image of crazy scholars who cheat, dedicate their lives to hopeless projects, specialise in areas that are so narrow to seem involuntarily comic, collect self-quotations, and establish routines incomprehensible to non-scholars, is hilarious. Examples of goliardic humour demolish serious academic matters, such as impact and outreach (“impact in academia is like sex: everyone is talking about it, but few are having it”, p. 145), publish or perish imperatives, and predatory publishing businesses and aggressive conference marketing. Not to mention peer review processes (“regardless of your discipline or the journal in which you publish, one of the reviewers will invariably: 1. Ask you to write a completely different paper (i.e. the paper they would have written); 2. Demand that you repeat or expand expensive and time-consuming experiments; or 3. Reject your paper out of hand, often with demoralising and petty comments”, p. 51).

However, the funny side conceals, or rather reveals, a more serious edge: scholars pressed into unethical or silly behaviours, the continuous growing demands exercised by institutions, policies and colleagues, and the students’ perception of teaching as service. The reader stops laughing when she realises that all the information collected in the volume is not made up, but comes from real evidence. Humour might have stretched the commentary on these practices towards paradox and hyperbole, but the stories narrated are about real events. The reader is then reminded that scholarly craziness is not a laughing matter.

In a letter dated Paris 1 May 1956, Samuel Beckett wrote to his Danish translator, Christian Ludvigsen, commenting on the humour in his own authorship: “let the people laugh by all means, and then be reminded it is no laughing matter”.⁶ Once again, the spirit of Beckett seems to capture the essence of *Academia Obscura*.

⁴ Battaglia, Salvatore (1933). *Goliardia*. In *Enciclopedia Italiana*, vol. 17, Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana. Retrieved 2 January 2018 at [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/goliardi_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/goliardi_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/)

⁵ Retrieved 2 January 2018 at www.glenwright.net.

⁶ Story told by Christian Ludvigsen in 1997 (*Det begyndte med Beckett – min egen teaterhistorie*. Århus: Institut for Dramaturgi, p. 41).

About the Author

Tatiana Chemi, Ph.D., is Associate Professor at Aalborg University, Denmark, Chair of Educational Innovation, where she works in the field of artistic learning and creative processes. She is the author of many published articles and reports, such as: *The Art of Arts Integration*, Aalborg University Press, 2014; with Jensen, J. B. & Hersted, L., *Behind the Scenes of Artistic Creativity*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2015. With Xiangyun Du she edited *Arts-based Methods and Organisational Learning: Higher Education Around the World*, Palgrave Studies in Business, Arts and Humanities (2018) and *Arts-based Methods in Education around the World*, River Publisher (2017). She is currently involved in research projects examining artistic creativity cross-culturally, arts-integrated educational designs in schools, theatre laboratory and acting as learning.