Book review

Oring, Elliott (2016). *Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humour.* **Boulder: University Press of Colorado. 283 pages.**

Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis and Aesthetics of Humour is a collection of twelve essays on humour, and more specifically on jokes, written by Elliot Oring, professor emeritus of anthropology and folklore. In all its parts, the scrupulously well-argued proposals and critique must be appreciated, along with the constant contextualisation of those in the broader picture of the literature available from different fields such as philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and folklore. His stances are always supported by the analysis of empirical data and concrete examples. It is therefore a very accessible book even for readers that are not specialists in the subject, both in terms of the terminology used (all of which is carefully explained) and of content (clearly and transparently presented).

The book opens with a chapter dedicated to Freud's theory on *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), which according to Oring, has been for a long time misrepresented by humour scholars. Freud is generally associated with the "tension release theory of humour", i.e. the idea that jokes and laughter are triggered by unconscious impulses functioning as a safety valve for forbidden feelings and thoughts. Such an interpretation would emerge from confusion between dreams and jokes, the former being fulfilments of repressed wishes, unknown to the dreamer, while the latter being voluntary expressions of conscious thoughts. The process that transforms a thought into a joke (i.e. the *joke-work*), is very similar to the *dream-work*, and unconscious, but unlike dreams the joke formation is easily accessible. A release of energy is undoubtedly present, but it does not constitute the cause, only the consequence of humour: it is not the energy of an unconscious impulse that is released; it is rather the energy that has been devoted to the inhibition of such expression (Freud 1960). Jokes deal with thoughts that are conscious but would be socially unacceptable if not "wrapped" in humorous frame. In light of Oring's analysis, Freud's point of view appears therefore to be more akin to a *rhetorical theory* of jokes rather than to a *tension release theory* after all.

The second chapter focuses on the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) (Attardo and Raskin 1991), a formal approach to the analysis of written humour. It is clearly presented and contextualised and each of its components, namely Knowledge Resources, are presented using empirical data that render the explanation very simple. It is, nevertheless, severely criticised with acute arguments for each of its elements, and experimental studies based on this framework are invalidated. The data used to identify fallacies in the GTVH are then interpreted by applying the Appropriate Incongruity Theory proposed by Oring himself (1992). Strong criticism concerns the fact that the reliability of GTVH analysis might be affected by the attempt to over-impose abstract formal templates on natural data.

Chapter three is centred on the *blending theory* (Coulson 2005) proposed within the field of cognitive linguistics, where humour is conceived to emerge from the overlap (and the *blending*) between two semantic areas. Weaknesses in its application are highlighted and discussed on the basis of empirical data. The focus of the criticism is that blending analysis

seems to presuppose a correct and complete analysis of the joke, on the basis of which, only in a later stage, the elements can be fitted in the "blending structure". If the interpretation is incorrect, there are no nodes in the analysis that could reveal it. An interesting discussion about similarities and discrepancies between jokes and metaphors is then introduced after referencing Attardo's (2006) criticism against blending theorists for not being able to distinguish humour from other kinds of verbal production (e.g. metaphors).

Chapter four is dedicated to the *benign violation theory* proposed by McGraw & Warren (2010): humour depends upon a sense of violation of moral principles that is regarded as benign, non-threatening, and towards which the subject is not too committed, being consequently acceptable and psychologically distant. Oring observes that this consequently results in an *emotional* theory of humour perception, inevitably in contrast with any incongruity theory where, by definition, the core element is the perception of a *cognitive dissonance*. Many weaknesses are pointed out (e.g. not being able to account for all kind of jokes), while the experimental studies conducted on the basis of their theory are invalidated. The main point the author defends is that recognising the centrality of cognitive processes does not mean excluding emotion from humour perception processes: incongruity theorists do not leave out emotions from the humour function, but acknowledge their crucial role in facilitating/preventing humour appreciation.

Chapter five is dedicated to Hurley et al.'s (2011) proposal of humour emerging when a belief, unconsciously active in our working memory, turns out to be false, unless the discovery arouses excessive negative emotions. In the first part of the chapter, Oring offers a long list of counterexamples in which such paradigm is proven inapplicable, while the second part focuses on the evolution of humour. Hurley et al. (2011) consider humour crucial for survival by reason of being a gratification for error-spotting in our constant inferential activity to predict what comes next. Oring is sceptical about several aspects of the proposal: the theory fails to account for the laughter of joy; in dangerous situations, responding to the realisation of an "inferential-error" with laughter might be fatal, and no animal would ever need a greater gratification than survival. He is also doubtful about the nature of the error-checking mechanism, criticising both the hypothesis of *data maintenance* (dangerous) and the *inferential improvement* function. Hurley et al. (2011) maintain that laughter evolved from a false-alarm call, to cancel the seriousness of some actions or signals. Oring agrees that humour nowadays does not serve the archetypical function, but believes that the only fruitful path to understand "*what it was for*" is to deeply investigate "*what it is*" at present.

Chapter six addresses the delicate argument of framing humour, presenting the case of *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2007). The comedy has been the object of much criticism (and many legal complaints) due to the numerous social convention violations carried out by the protagonist, considered offensive and often racist. Those reactions were triggered despite the explicit comic frame in which the film/documentary is presented. As observed by other authors (e.g. Tsakona 2013), whether some stimuli can be perceived as funny or not, depends extremely on the recipient, on his/her sociocultural presuppositions and on the knowledge that can be accessed concerning the stimuli: the intentions and background of the "producer" and the product itself. The author concludes by acknowledging the fact that humour can easily be an object of moral indignation, but that very much depends on the frame that the perceiver him/herself imposes on the material.

Chapter seven deals with the subject of jokes under totalitarian regimes, especially Stalinism, when joking was socially and physically a "risky business". Oring presents several "funny" examples and reviews opinions from different scholars concerning the function and/or cause of such a dangerous practice, offering his criticism on each of them. The last hypothesis presented conceives joking as a means of maintaining a sense of identity and self, offering a

brief respite from reality (Freud 1905; Limón 1997) and allowing for the creation of a little space where the party and the dictator cannot penetrate (Oring 2003). Unfortunately though, any "victory" that emerges from such activity is purely psychological, having no effect on the actual political situation. Therefore, it is possible that, functioning as morale-boosting, joking might become a substitute for action and, helping to tolerate the situation, it may prevent any active resistance. The essay concludes with a still open question: are jokes under totalitarianisms actually useless? Why keep risking one's life through "joking"?

Chapter eight opens with a discussion of what constitutes folklore, and especially folk humour, on the internet, a cyberspace where communication, including joke telling, is characterised by great replicability and asynchrony of interaction. The discussion focuses then on jokes organised as lists which in the oral tradition usually include a small set of items (Olrik 1965), but on the internet they may become incredibly lengthy. It is interesting that, despite the possibility of replicating faithfully the joke, variations are very common and large space is offered to creativity (Shifman and Thelwall 2009). The web seems to be the ideal place for *list-jokes* and *joke-lists* (where each line is in itself humorous), being a media where data is mainly visually processed, as lists usually are, and inviting for participation insofar as "bricolage" is easy: copying, cutting, adding, and combining is desired, within the bounds of joking structure "rules". In conclusion *joke-lists* form a kind of tradition in cyberspace, with all the properties of a folklore subject.

In chapter nine the author draws attention to the form a joke is "wrapped up" in, i.e. the knowledge resource called "Narrative Strategy" within the GTVH (Attardo & Raskin 1991). Oring considers this term inappropriate given that cross-linguistically and diachronically only a very small percentage (10%) of the performances included under the umbrella term *joke* actually have a narrative conclusion. The punch line does not usually offer a narrative closure, but it only serves to reveal the *appropriateness* of some relation that at first appeared spuriously incongruous (Oring 1992). He concludes by drawing scholars' attention, and especially linguists' attention, to the literary aspects of jokes and their evolution over time.

The tenth chapter is completely dedicated to "Jewish jokes", a term commonly used to refer to jokes told by Jewish people about their own culture, traditions, and stereotyped physical characteristics. Many theories and studies on the topic are presented and compared. Oring highlights the need for comparative studies with other cultures and traditions, both in terms of discourse style and of joking practice as a result of long suffering, arguing for the necessity of contextualisation and integration within history, in order to "demythologise" a phenomenon that might have nothing specifically Jewish about it.

The eleventh chapter is focused on the essence of art: what it is and what should be considered as such. Oring suggests that this reflection together with a reflection on jokes will be fruitful for understanding both jokes and art. After reviewing several philosophical positions, the author proposes a detailed and careful comparison between jokes and art highlighting their similarities and differences. He concludes by stating that jokes are aesthetic objects, paving the way to the twelfth chapter, where Oring stands up for the right of jokes to be considered verbal art, i.e. an extraordinary arrangement of words and ideas that attracts attention and is perceived as something remarkable for a certain period of time. The chapter is dedicated to analysing a discussion between two expert joke tellers about their respective performances, from which the author manages to extrapolate some concrete principles that may constitute the basis for an aesthetics of jokes (and humour more generally), which he considers one of the most neglected topics by both philosophers and folklorists.

I think that Oring's book is a very valuable reading recommended for anyone willing to acquire a broad perspective on humour research and to be exposed to exemplary and acute critical reasoning. I particularly appreciated the attention devoted throughout the entire work to the subjectivity and pragmatic competence required for humour to be appreciated and

produced, such as mind reading skills and contextualisation. Nevertheless, I believe that the book would have been more complete if at least one chapter was dedicated more specifically and exclusively to Oring's appropriate incongruity theory, in order to have room for presenting it more systematically and proposing structured applications. I would strongly recommend the book to researchers and students, for the reason of being enlightening on some deficiencies in the current state of the art (e.g. the extreme bias towards studies conducted in the Western world) and inspiring for new paths that humour research could take in an attempt to answer the many questions still open after 2,500 years.

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