



Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor

Dan Ben-Amos

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dead female immigrant on the cover of Gerardo Muñoz Lorente's 2003 novel *Ramito de hierbabuena*, 'Sprig of Peppermint', undermines the work's ostensible function as a 'counter narrative to official discourse of immigration' (147). While the photograph depicts an actual image of a dead person, the novel itself is nonetheless a work of fiction, meaning that the woman's story remains untold, obscured behind the 'untrue' narrative. The relationship between image and text, and the use of photographs to control the female body and represent the absent, are given further consideration in Marta Sierra's essay on Cristina Rivera Garza's 1999 novel *Nadie me verá Llorar*, 'No One Will See Me Cry'.

The mysterious, spectral qualities of capitalism are the focus of the fourth and final section, entitled 'Invisible Hands: Specters of the Market Economy'. Whereas Juan Pablo Lupi examines the relationship between Venezuela's colonial past and identity as a petrostate through the lens of Enrique Bernardo Núñez's 1931 novel *Cubagua* (178), María de Carmen Caña Jiménez showcases how works such as *Diccionario Esotérico* ('Esoteric dictionary', 2006) use allegories of vampirism and body horror to express dissatisfaction with neoliberal ideologies. In the final essay in the volume, Victoria L. Garrett and Edward M. Chauca argue that the 2010 film *Beautiful* (dir. A. G. Iñárritu) sheds light on the plight of the undocumented workers—'ghosts'—who toil within the capitalist system.

Ideas of disruption, concealed pain, and the dissonance between space and time permeate each of the essays contained in *Espectros*. The contributors provide welcome and pertinent insights into the ways in which transhispanic writers, artists, and directors have conceptualized historical and contemporary traumas. The 'spectre', to use the language of Derrida, is the perfect vehicle through which to express the inexpressible. *Espectros*, then, offers a vital contribution to the study of contemporary ghost literature and transhispanic political history. It will no doubt be a key text for years to come.

Stephen Gordon, University of Manchester, UK

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Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor. By Elliott Oring. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2016. xiv + 283 pp. \$34.95 (pbk), \$27.95 (e-book). ISBN 978-1-60732-491-1 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-60731-492-8 (e-book)

Joking aside, *Joking Asides* is a very serious book about humour in general and folk humour in particular. Erudite and challenging, and welcoming challenge itself, the book includes historical, theoretical, and analytical essays that are not clustered into distinct parts. The first is a historical chapter, 'What Freud Actually Said about Jokes' (3–15), in which Oring sifts Freud's theory from the exegesis and the additions his followers contributed, and is an example of textual analysis at its best. Historical, but also current, is the chapter on 'Political Jokes under Repressive Regimes' (109–28), and the third in this group is 'Demythologizing the Jewish Joke' (165–81), which constructs the history of the concept of 'Jewish humour'. Other essays deal with humour in film and on the Internet, rhetoric and aesthetics of jokes performance, narration, and visual art.

At the centre of the book is a group of four consecutive essays in which Oring asserts his own characterization of humour comparatively. Humour is universal, but only laughter, or in a milder form a smile, exposes its existence. Laughter, to use the terminology of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), is only a symptom, the cause of which generations of thoughtful people sought to discover. Unfortunately, even for them it was an incidental inquiry. Consequently, historically, humour was the Cinderella of human attributes. Language, reason,

religion, politics, physics, and metaphysics were at the centre of philosophical inquiries while humour received only their crumbs, being identified with its apparent frivolity. Philosophers from Plato to Kant paid thoughtful lip service to humour. Only at the dawn of the twentieth century did Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) each devote a whole book to humour, igniting thereby a spark that, by the end of the century, grew into an intellectual flame for which Elliott Oring carried the folklore torch. He formulated his own characterization of humour, and, in these four essays, he compares it with those of his contemporaries.

Over thirty years ago, Oring proposed to consider humour as an *appropriate incongruity*, 'that is, the perception of an appropriate interrelationship of elements from domains that are generally regarded as incongruous' (x). He first proposed this characterization in *Israeli Humor* (1981) and then elaborated upon it in 'Jokes and the Discourse of Disaster' (1987), *Jokes and Their Relations* (1992), 'Appropriate Incongruities: Genuine and Spurious' (1995), and *Engaging Humor* (2003). He drew upon the conception of humour that the poet and philosopher James Beattie (1735–1803) formulated and D. H. Monro (1911–2001) phrased. In doing so, Oring opted to construct his humour theory within the incongruity paradigm, in preference to the superiority and the relief paradigms, the dominant threesome models of humour theories.

At the outset Oring states: 'The virtues of the formulation *appropriate incongruity* are that: (1) the notion is clear and concise; (2) it is rooted in previous conceptualization of humor; (3) it provides a method for the close analysis of various humorous forms and behaviors; (4) it is "experience near"; that is, the people whose humor I study can generally grasp it; and (5) it is imprecise. This last would not at first seem to be a virtue, but in fact, adhering to rigid formulations of what constitutes a joke or humorous expression can lead analysis astray' (x; original emphasis). In subsequent essays, he sets out to demonstrate the preference of his formulation for other prevailing theories and definitions of humour. He contrasts his characterization of humour directly with each of the following: Attardo's and Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor (16–32), cognitive linguistics' Blending Theory (33–56), McGraw's and Warren's Benign Violation Theory (57–80), and finally against the most recent 'False Belief Theory' proposed by psychologists Hurley, Dennett, and Adams (81–100).

All of these theories follow, to a large extent, the incongruity paradigm, at the basis of which there is a dichotomous conception of cultural cognitive categories. Their respective contact points, as Roger Bastide (1898–1974) proposed, serve as a short-circuit of thought that triggers laughter. But, as Oring insightfully points out, 'incongruity theorists of every stripe would admit that they do not know why certain types of incongruity provoke amusement and laughter ... [and that] incongruity theories do not claim that incongruity in and of itself is humorous' (89). Indeed there are many cases in which it is not, as Alexander Bain (1818–1903) already pointed out in *The Emotion and the Will* (1859). Nor could incongruity, and therefore humour, be perceived in all domains of culture. For the believer, for example, religion is harmonious and therefore faith and humour are mutually exclusive. In a religious framework, incongruity is conceived as a miracle and is the basis for stories and belief in marvels and magic. The recognition of non-humorous incongruities is a major challenge to the incongruity paradigm of humour theories, Oring's included. Is it incongruity itself which causes laughter, or as Tomas Kulka argues in 'The Incongruity of Incongruity Theories of Humor' (1990), is it its resolution that is funny? Are non-humorous incongruities simply those which are difficult to resolve or completely irresolvable? Oring might have accepted this argument, particularly since he considers 'imprecision' to be one of the virtues of his characterization. Yet, in his formulation, 'imprecision' is misplaced. His definition is precise, but human systems are not. Henri Bergson has already argued that 'the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly, it will never be laughable' ('Laughter', in *Comedy*, edited by Wylie Sypher [1956], 62; original emphasis). The subjects of humour are to be found in the symbolic systems that

humankind created ranging from language, family, social structure, politics, and economy to law, and others. These systems are neither logically nor practically perfect, and their cracks incite humour in the form of verbal, visual, and dramatic narratives attempting to patch them up.

Dan Ben-Amos, *University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA*

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Georgian Folk Traditions and Legends. By Elene Virsaladze. Translated by David Hunt. Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2016. 416 pp. No price information available (pbk). ISBN 978-9-94146-335-8

The anglophone folklore-reader owes much to the late David Hunt. Over the years, he translated, via Russian, much rare Caucasian folklore material into English. The multilingual, mountainous Caucasus holds a reputation as one of the world's most folklore-rich areas, and yet the amount of material on this folklore that is available in English would seem to be in inverse proportion to that richness. The folklorist Elene Virsaladze (1911–77) published a notable amount of research during her career, including anthologies of folk prose and folk verse. The book under review here is an English translation of her Georgian folk prose anthology, itself in Russian translation *Gruzinskije narodnye predanija i legendy* (1973).

The book proper opens with a substantial forty-page foreword by Virsaladze. This is followed by a rich selection of narrative texts. Many of these are etiological tales, describing the origin of the seas and mountains, as well as various other significant objects, including, as one section heading has it, 'the origin of gold, wine and musical instruments' (298). There are a number of cosmogonic narratives too: 'the devil advised God: "Squeeze the earth with your mighty hands, and the sky, like a roof, will cover it exactly." And truly, the creator followed the devil's advice, he embraced the earth and squeezed it. The sky itself settled in its place, but the earth bent from this grip' (68–69). The narratives are followed by thirty-five pages of 'Commentary and Sources', and the book concludes with a brief list of abbreviations (which does duty for a bibliography) and a glossary, useful for terms such as *Kudiani*, 'a witch with a tail' (414).

Several of the narratives were collected by Virsaladze herself in the middle years of the twentieth century in more remote parts of Georgia, such as Svaneti. Earlier researchers collected others of these tales during the nineteenth century. Georgian folklore, like other Caucasian and some Balkan folklore, has a fantastical element to it that is rather striking. For example, tale 113 begins: 'The shining Morning Star, giving us winter and summer, was taken prisoner by Queen Tamar, and fastened with chains. By her wish, Queen Tamar changed the Star into a horse, saddled him and rode on him' (211). What makes this story all the more striking is that Queen Tamar is not a deity, but a monarch—a historical figure who reigned during the thirteenth century.

It is not entirely clear to me what the thematic or generic difference is between the material under the two headings 'Traditions' and 'Legends'—a note in Virsaladze's foreword says that the 'Traditions' have a 'cosmogonical, mythological, etiological, historical, heroic ... [or] moral-philosophical character' (21), whereas the 'Legends' are 'of an apocryphal or moral-didactic character'. But some practical differences as to their treatment do follow on from this division: the book contains more 'Traditions' than 'Legends' (187 pages as opposed to 26 pages), and the former also tend to be more fully annotated (including by means of motif numbers) than the Legends, perhaps reflecting that Virsaladze saw them as more worthy of attention. One editorial decision by Hunt that was particularly helpful was to transfer the explanatory part of the endnotes to act as headnotes at the start of each