Book Review

Elliott Oring. 2016. *Joking asides: The theory, analysis, and aesthetics of humor*. Utah State University Press. 282 pp. ISBN: 978-1607324911.

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This set of essays, some avowedly republished, comprise Oring's contributions to several areas of humor research, all of them ongoing. He begins by re-examining Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, intending to refute the idea that its author's humor theory is based on psychological relief. Instead Freud's key principle is the economy of psychological expenditure evident in jokes, the comic, and humor, phenomena which, unlike dreams, originate in the preconscious rather than the unconscious. Chapter two reconsiders Attardo and Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor, underlining some of its gaps and imprecisions, while stating, unanswerably, that "if the mechanisms of joking can be specified, it will prove a major triumph for humor studies" (p. 22). However, the theory as examined is vitiated by its attempts to impose pre-established categories onto jokes, those "incredibly complex affairs" (p. 32) whose workings are not analogous to those of a machine.

Oring complements this critique with a similar examination of "Blending theory," seen as less appropriate to humor than his own notion of appropriate incongruity, and that particularly insofar as jokes, unlike, say, metaphors, never lose the distinctive qualities that comprise their particular and perceptible incongruities. Appropriate incongruity then reappears in chapter four, where it is contrasted with the "Benign Violation" theory of McGraw, Warner, and their predecessor Thomas Veatch. Unlike them, Oring considers humor, like language itself, to be an intellectual rather than emotional activity, even citing as a prerequisite of a humorous response the (to me dubious) Bergsonian principle of "momentary anesthesia of the heart" (p. 61). Though emotion can augment the success of a joke or humorous experience, it is not fundamental to either.

Oring's next target is the so-called False Belief Theory propounded by Hurley, Adams, and Dennett in their *Inside Jokes* (2011) for whom humor "is theorized as the recognition of mistaken covert beliefs" (p. 97: surely too narrow a perspective), the elimination of which has a positive evolutionary function. Yet the durability of certain stock jokes and humor situations is enough to refute the latter point, for if a laughing response implied the elimination of false beliefs, then surely humanity would be progressively emancipating itself from the very need for humor.

Having argued extensively and not ineffectively for his own theory, Oring turns in chapter six to the film *Borat*, whose deliberately offensive material amounts to a series of practical jokes targeted at innocent victims, providing a test case of how comedy can challenge morality, decency, and political correctness. His following chapter also considers the possibility of challenge, namely that posed to repressive regimes by jokes that have circulated within them, sometimes with the collusion of those same repressive authorities. Deploying analyses that stretch from ancient Greece to Soviet Russia, he concludes, somewhat pessimistically, that "political joking [...] may have no discernible function" (p. 128), surely a denial of its capacity to bond likeminded associates and so reinforce their morale.

Less compelling though equally amusing is the following chapter concerning the form and content of joke lists circulating on the Internet. Do we need to be informed that these display "great variation" (p. 138), that they are compiled rather than evolving (p. 139), or that "individuals can make their own contributions" to them (p. 141), while to claim that "a narrative joke [...] cannot be filled with irrelevant details" (p. 139) seemingly defies the nature of the shaggy-dog story? However, the material on emoticons (i.e. keyboard characters formed into facial expressions) is more enlightening, and Oring certainly ranges widely, for instance via tags, Internet fora and emails, in his attempt to delineate how the digital age is at once accommodating and transforming folklore.

Spreading back through the centuries, his next chapter attempts to define the narrative joke as a subcategory within joking, noting how it displays a sequence of events on which the punch line supplies an (of course) appropriately incongruous comment, and to which it may, in a further subcategory, form a completion, specifically by revealing a narrative element previously hidden from both characters and readers. This type, described tentatively as the "true narrative joke" (p. 157), may be a recent development, at least as regards its predominance within comic stories.

Chapter ten's perspective is similarly historical, reviving the ancient subject of Jewish humor, supposedly traceable in its origins to Eastern Europe and in its analysis to Freud, who, unlike many successors, actually never claimed that the self-directed nature of Jewish humor implied a collective masochism. In fact, Jewish jokes cannot at present be reliably characterized as self-critical, all national typologies of humor being conjectural. Meanwhile the association of Jewish humor with the suffering of the Jewish people remains suspiciously circular. Reckoning that the whole notion of a specifically Jewish humor has been mythologized, Oring concludes with a series of hypotheses to which future research might be directed: (1) The concept of a Jewish humor developed in nineteenth century Germany, not further east; (2) It is not distinct by nature from

other ethnic types, than whom (3) Jews are not intrinsically more humorous; (4) The Jewish Enlightenment was crucial in precipitating a "Jewish humor"; and (5) Jewish humor is not by nature different from that of any persecuted community.

Oring's penultimate chapter elaborates an ingenious comparison between humor and art, concluding that though neither is easily objectified, to exclude the former from the latter (see Carroll 2003 on jokes) is too limiting. Aesthetic theory should perhaps spread its enquiries more widely so as to include, in particular, the numerous similarities between jokes and what are acknowledged to be works of art. Aesthetic considerations also figure in the final chapter where Oring analyses the joke-telling techniques of two of his dinner-party guests, arguing that such treatments of live performance are more fruitful than aprioristic statements such as Carroll is seen to make on jokes as a type of utterance.

With appreciable modesty Oring's Afterword asserts that his own theory of appropriate incongruity has not yet exhausted the questions it raises. It does, however, have the advantage of propounding testable hypotheses, hence up to his final sentence we find him encouraging others to participate in the debates that he intends to develop. One also admires his vast erudition and the range of his enquiries, and while others may determine whether his own theory is more applicable to jokes than to other forms of humor, it remains undeniable that *Joking Asides* is but one more confirmation of Oring's status as one of our leading theoreticians.

Reference

Carroll, N. 2003. Humor. In J. Levinson (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of aesthetics*, 344–365. Oxford: Oxford University Press.