

Book review

Simon, John Charles & Jennalee Donian (2025). *Understanding Laughter and Humour: Why We Laugh, Why We Don't, and Why It Matters*. Palgrave Macmillan.

I think that, as humour scholars, we all more or less tend to agree on the fact that the interdisciplinarity in the field of humour studies is an asset: it helps us better understand the complex phenomenon of humour in its diverse manifestations across historical periods and cultures. This interdisciplinarity is clearly documented in the compilation of handbooks and encyclopaedias bringing together an impressively wide range of approaches to humour (see among others Raskin, 2008; Attardo, 2014, 2017; Ford et al., 2024; Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2024). Still, through the years and thanks to the proliferation of publications in this field, it has become increasingly difficult to even attempt to follow aspects of this interdisciplinarity. So, when I was invited to review John Charles Simon and Jennalee Donian's *Understanding laughter and humour: Why we laugh, why we don't, and why it matters*, I initially felt that, coming from (socio)linguistics, I am not the right person to do it. Later, I reframed the endeavour as an exercise in interdisciplinarity, and I thought that I may not be able to assess its content as a biologist would do, but still I will learn something about how biologists perceive the object I have been studying for several years now. So, my review comes with certain limitations or, to use Simon and Donian's words, certain *vulnerabilities*.

The book under review is a second revised edition (the first being Simon, 2008) and it has already been reviewed for this journal (see Anderton, 2014). Even though Simon is a wildlife biologist, and Donian has an interdisciplinary background (English literature, media/cultural studies, and philosophy), the book mostly adopts a biological perspective to put forward the Mutual Vulnerability Theory of laughter (henceforth MVT), which connects laughter with humour and tries to account for what humour is as well. The authors' specific aim is to reach "a *comprehensive* understanding of laughter [which] would obviously be of tremendous benefit" (p. 2, my emphasis). The book is complemented with a useful companion/guide, which provides several examples of laughter and humour analysed via the MVT (Simon & Donian, 2025), but this will not be further discussed in the present review.

In Chapter 1 "Introduction" of the monograph, the authors begin with highlighting the versatility of laughter, its different functions in different settings, its diverse and often opposing effects (e.g. unite enemies vs. divide friends; p. 2). Yet, a universal or comprehensive theory is sought for, accounting for all different manifestations and functions of laughter and humour. The Introduction also includes the overview of the book chapters.

Chapter 2 on "Ancient wisdom and modern insights", following the tradition established by the majority of monographs about humour, is dedicated to an overview of the main theories of laughter/humour: superiority, tension relief, and incongruity. Given that the authors are mostly interested in putting forward their own theory, an extensive discussion of the shortcomings of these theories is deemed necessary and provided here. The inadequacies pointed out and the objections raised *vis-à-vis* these theories are not new: they have been discussed by numerous studies more or less extensively. To mention one out of too many

examples coming from this chapter, when discussing the limits of incongruity theory, the authors ask: “What differentiates the incongruities that inspire laughter from those that simply elicit surprise or horror?” (p. 19). Such questions are indeed significant as a form of criticism and could indeed inspire further research, but it should have been clear in this chapter that there have been important attempts to address the main theories’ shortcomings by many humour scholars whose work is not cited (on the differences between humour and horror, see among others Straßburger, 2022).

Chapter 3 “Communication at its core” attempts to explain how the authors conceptualise laughter. Laughter constitutes “a form of communication” and “contains a message about what the sender feels or thinks” (p. 33). Therefore, when faced with laughter, individuals are expected to decipher what this message means, even in cases when we feign laughter, that is, when laughter is expected or desired but not spontaneously or genuinely offered. Communication is perceived as an active, intentional, and reciprocal transmission of signals which need to be correctly interpreted and responded to, if communication is to succeed.

In Chapter 4 titled “The heart of the Mutual Vulnerability Theory”, the authors propose the central idea of their theory, namely that “laughter is a vocal affirmation of mutual vulnerability” (p. 43), and dedicate the whole chapter to clarifying what they mean by this. Starting with vulnerability itself, they perceive it as

the susceptibility of being wounded or attacked, not just by physical means, but also by criticism, blackmail, and other indirect assaults. In its broadest sense, we can think of vulnerability as something inherent to every object or process through which an identifiable objective is sought (p. 34).

Vulnerability can be *physical* (e.g. “[w]e want to move about confidently, but sometimes fail”, p. 46), *emotional* (e.g. “unwarranted paranoia or frustration”, p. 49), *cognitive* (e.g. “the inability to remember something correctly”, p. 51), or *social* (e.g. “ignorance of cultural codes”, p. 53), and can affect (usually diminish) our social status. Laughter transmits the message that such vulnerabilities are shared among all of us, hence it functions as a vocal affirmation of *mutual* vulnerability. More specifically, laughter can be:

- *Lifting*: the laughter shows sympathy or affection towards the person laughed at/with;
- *Lowering*: the laughter wishes to put the person laughed at back to its ‘proper’ position;
- *Self-Lifting*: the laughter aims to restore his/her own status after an embarrassing event;
- *Self-Lowering*: the laughter shows that s/he is aware of his/her own vulnerability by lowering him/herself.

Chapter 5 “Humor and its relationship to laughter” shows how the authors’ conceptualisation of humour is modelled on their conceptualisation of laughter as a vocal affirmation of mutual vulnerability. More specifically, humour is defined as “[a]ny deliberate attempt to inspire a feeling of amusement by creating, manipulating, or highlighting the vulnerability of characters with whom the audience (which may include the humourist and/or referent) can identify” (p. 72). Then, the authors proceed with distinguishing between *informal* and *formal* humour, the former being more spontaneous and less planned than the latter. Informal humour is also addressed to humourists’ immediate social group, while formal humour is meant to entertain wider audiences. Depending on the kind of vulnerability involved (see Chapter 4 above), informal humour can be physical, emotional, cognitive, or social. Based on the same kinds of vulnerability, formal humour is produced by pranksters,

trickster, jesters, clowns, storytellers, jokesters, cartoonists, satirists, comedians, comedia writers, comedic actors, and playwrights.

At the end of the chapter, the authors briefly refer to the wide range of emotions motivating humour including happiness, excitement, joy, loyalty, indebtedness, humility, charity, victory, relief, camaraderie, affection, frustration, anger, loss, disgust, sadness, concern, hopelessness, embarrassment, envy, dislike, anxiety, confusion, uncertainty, boredom, etc. (p. 92). They also distinguish four kinds of humour depending on the kind of laughter produced (see Chapter 4 above): *Elevating* humour is related to *Lifting* laughter; *Disparaging* humour to *Lowering* laughter; *Self-Elevating* humour is related to *Self-Lifting* laughter; and *Self-Disparaging* humour to *Self-Lowering* laughter.

In Chapter 6 “Detecting vulnerability”, the authors explore individuals’ ability to identify vulnerability, which is the prerequisite for laughter and for the production and perception of humour, according to the proposed theory. Based on the premise that what constitutes vulnerability is not something all people will agree on, Simon and Donian offer an extensive discussion concerning the factors that influence or determine what we assess as vulnerability, and why. Such factors include age, gender, personality, personal history and life experience, religion, sociopolitical ideology, national identity, as well as more fluctuation-prone parameters, such as our mood, current life status, and health.

The discussion of factors affecting the detection of (mutual) vulnerability and hence the emergence of laughter and humour continues in Chapter 7 on “Group dynamics and their influence”. It moves on to the significance of the presence (or absence) of other people when we detect vulnerability, our relationship with them (in terms of relative social status, distance vs. affiliation), the size of the group of people present when we laugh and/or produce humour (encouraging or discouraging consensus and communal bonding through laughter/humour), and, in general, the importance of social context for the emergence (or not) of laughter and humour. The authors conclude that “[t]here are very few situations or activities incapable of inspiring laughter given the right combination of mood, personality, experience, interrelationships, distancing, and social context” (p. 148, emphasis in the original).

Chapter 8 titled “The search for laughter’s origins” explores the genealogy of laughter from a biological/ethological perspective. Empirical evidence from the observation of apes (i.e. common chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, orangutans, and gibbons) lead the authors to the conclusion that “we can be reasonably confident that human laughter shares a common lineage with great ape laughter” (p. 165), and that human and ape laughter “continue to perform the same function today” (p. 167) – which is the following:

[laughter’s] ultimate purpose is to increase the likelihood of ingroup cooperative behaviour by reminding others of their shared vulnerabilities, evaluating each member’s propensity to reciprocally aid one another, embarrassing less reliable allies to bring them back into the fold, and excluding those who are suspected or determined to be persistent noncooperators (p. 167).

Therefore, “the MVT provides an ever-broadening framework of understanding” laughter and humour (p. 167), because it can account for common behavioural patterns between humans and apes, such as tickling, play, fighting, or mock attacks, which indicate vulnerability. In the rest of the chapter, the authors explore in less detail the relation between smile and laughter (“smile can occur independently of laughter, but laughter is almost always accompanied by a smile”, pp. 172-173) and between laughter and crying (“in crying we find our strongest candidate for the progenitor of laughter”, p. 179).

The search for the biological origins of laughter continues in Chapter 9 on “The evolution of laughter and humour”, where the authors investigate human motivations for laughter and the reasons for its frequent use in our everyday lives. Laughter is consistently connected with

increased human vulnerability, since “the more variable, flexible, and malleable our life choices, the greater the opportunity for ‘detours’ and ‘mishaps’ to be encountered on the road to success” (p. 194). In addition, laughter is extensively discussed as a signal of *play*, the latter being defined as “the exercise of life-sustaining skills under a presumption of reduced costs and benefits” (p. 169). The authors argue that play is a common activity among humans because they are lifelong learners open to new experiences and challenges; they show mobility by moving from our context to another and adapting therein; they use and play with language; they have increasingly more free time than their biological ancestors; and they have a deliberate understanding of the advantages of play. The authors conclude the chapter by stating that all this *does not* mean that the MVT constitutes a variant of existing play theories of laughter (p. 202).

After pointing out a number of deficiencies in the three main theories of laughter/humour in Chapter 2, the authors revisit these theories in Chapter 10 titled “Some implications of the MVT”, in order to elaborate on their common elements with the MVT. Among other things, they mention that the concept of *incongruity* as a deviation from what is expected is close to vulnerability conceptualised as a deviation from the norm; that laughter showing mutual vulnerability functions as a mechanism releasing emotional, social, etc. *tension* caused by our sense of vulnerability; and that laughter communicates other people’s or our own *inferiority* or vulnerability. Then, the authors focus on humorous phenomena that cannot, as they claim, be accounted for in terms of these main theories of laughter/humour. These are sardonic laughter and aggressive humour by bullies, the contagious quality of humour, and the mere sense of humour. Their discussion is thought-provoking, but my impression is that humour scholars who have done more or less extensive research on relevant topics may conclude that the authors’ observations are in need of better empirical and bibliographical support.

Chapter 11 titled “The MVT as guide” has, in a sense, a more practical or applied orientation, as it elaborates on how the theory can “serve to make our lives [...] better” (p. 231). The authors concentrate on guidelines and advice concerning how to deal with the consequences of laughter and humour. Among other things, they discuss some contextual parameters that should be taken into consideration when communicating via humour (e.g. context, interactants’ relationship, personal history), how to avoid or amend misinterpretations of humour (e.g. by conveying good will, proceeding with caution, and explaining intentions), how to foster laughter skills (e.g. by appropriately tickling children, by creating a sense of trust and security for the audience), how to handle bullies (e.g. through discussing with them the root motivations and causes of their behaviour), and eventually how to use laughter and humour as a useful tool for getting to know each other in a more profound manner.

The final Chapter 12 “Going forward” summarises key notions and aspects of the theory as emerging from the previous chapters and as addressing research questions often posed by humour scholars. Thus, the authors wish to support the wide scope and validity of their theory and simultaneously call for further research along these lines.

In my view, the most important aspect of exercises in interdisciplinarity is the different perspective we gain on things we are already familiar with, and the subsequent awareness of our limitations. The aspired “universality” or, in other words, “comprehensiveness” of MVT made me wonder whether we actually need, and eventually can come up with, *such* a theory, after all. Given that humour is, on the one hand, universal, but on the other hand, culture-specific and historically-determined, and the related phenomena may exhibit significant differences among them, maybe a single theory, no matter how broad, may not be able to account for each and every manifestation or genre of humour (see also Condren, 2024). If we accept what the authors claim in Chapter 2, none of the three main theories of laughter/humour have achieved that either, yet they remain invaluable for our analytical endeavours.

In my reading, the MVT is no exception to that: one of its vulnerabilities is that it verges towards what Billig (2005, p. 10) calls *ideological positivism*, namely “an optimistic can-do outlook in a society that offers its inhabitants the dream of constant, positively productive pleasures. The cruelties of this social order are overlooked, as if there is an imperative to wish away the negatives”. Simon and Donian appear to place more emphasis on the positive aspects of laughter and humour when they claim that the laughter/humourist and his/her target/s “share some degree of vulnerability” (p. 57, emphasis in the original), that the “Lowering laughter [...] is more the exception” (p. 212), that “laughter more frequently serves to convey solidarity and sympathy than dominance and indifference” (p. 212), and that “the most common response from the audience is Lifting Laughter” (p. 216). The extensive research on disparagement/aggressive humour (see among others Billig, 2001; Attardo 2023, pp. 217-248; Saucier et al., 2024) would make it hard to imagine that the humour produced and circulated by bigots, racists, misogynists, etc. stems from their detection of some *shared* vulnerability with the targets of their humour. Disparagement/aggressive humour more often than not has to do with sustaining relations of power and inequality, and contributes to the marginalisation and exclusion of its targets. Empathy and mutuality are usually not its motive.

Even if it could be so in some cases, only time and empirical evidence will tell. The MVT definitely needs extensive empirical testing and application to various data, as the authors themselves repeat at several points throughout their monograph. If we wish to understand how laughter and humour work in human communication and communities, it may be useful and enlightening to check what happens with our biological ancestors or relatives (i.e. the apes), but is it enough? Could it be the same? After all, this is how theories acquire merit and become valid: when scholars hypothesise and, hopefully, confirm that a certain theory allows them to account for their data and sheds light on phenomena that previous/other theories might have missed or misinterpreted.

To sum up, Simon and Donian propose another interesting lens through which we could see laughter and humour, and it is up to current and future humour scholars to adopt, criticise, or revise this proposal. The book is recommended not only for biologists and philosophers, but for all of us who come from different fields and are not reluctant to confirm that the more we read about complex phenomena such as humour, the less we (realise we) know. No comprehensive theory could ever take this joy away from us...

Villy Tsakona

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
vtsakona@ecd.uoa.gr, villytsa@otenet.gr

References

- Anderton, J. (2014). Book review: Simon, J. C. (2008). *Why we laugh - A new understanding*. Carmel, IN: Starbrook Press. 301 pp. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 2(1), 63-66.
- Attardo, S. (Ed.) (2014). *Encyclopaedia of humour studies*. Sage.
- Attardo, S. (Ed.) (2017). *The Routledge handbook of language and humour*. Routledge.
- Attardo, S. (2023). *Humour 2.0: How the internet changed humour*. Anthem Press.
- Billig, M. (2001). Humour and hatred: The racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan. *Discourse and Society*, 12(3), 267-289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265010120030>
- Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. Sage.

- Condren, C. (2024). Humour as umbrella term: Some implications of a classifier. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 12(4), 21-32. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2024.12.4.925>
- Ford, T. E., Chłopicki, W., & Kuipers, G. (Eds.) (2024). *De Gruyter handbook of humour studies*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Raskin, V. (Ed.) (2008). *The primer of humour research*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Saucier D. A., Lawless, T. J., Miller, S. S., & Prokhorets, S. S. (2024). Disparagement humour and subversion. In T. E. Ford, W. Chłopicki, & G. Kuipers (Eds.), *De Gruyter Handbook of Humour Studies* (pp. 431-447). De Gruyter.
- Simon, J. C. (2008). *Why we laugh: A new understanding*. Starbrook Press.
- Simon, J. C. & Donian, J. (2025). *Understanding laughter and humour: A companion and guide*. Volume 1. John Charles Simon Consulting LLC.
- Straßburger, L. (2022). *Humour and horror: Different emotions, similar linguistic processing strategies*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Vanderheiden, E., & Mayer, C.-H. (Eds.) (2024). *The Palgrave handbook of humour research*, 2nd edition. Palgrave Macmillan.