

Book review¹

Oring, Elliott (2023). *The Consolations of Humour and Other Folklore Essays*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

In this latest collection of articles, Elliott Oring revisits his long-lasting research interests as well as the major themes of both humour and folklore research. Most of the chapters are extended and elaborated versions of the authors' previous essays and lectures.

Preceded by the Preface, the first three chapters concentrate on various thematic joke cycles. Chapter 1, "The consolation of humour", which also gave a title to the book, is about Mormons' joke cycle about a church authority and missionary J. Golden Kimball. The chapter simultaneously revolves around several topics recently rather abandoned in folklore studies: religious humour, positive (rather than usually discussed negative) vernacular authority, and the intellectual (yet often unconscious) process of deciphering a joke. The specific contents of this joke cycle highlighting the incongruity of the human and the godly allows Oring to go beyond the analysis of the contents of the joke to its structural features which enable the joke to be funny. Whether the results of this research are to be extrapolated to other instances of religious humour is a question yet to be answered by further research.

Chapter 2, "Three Jewish jokes" revisits a stereotype of the Jewish jokes' superiority and uniqueness by comparing them with other international jokes. Zooming into and deconstructing three Jewish jokes, Oring asks "if the Jewish joke is to be understood as a response to persecution and Anti-semitism [which is the most frequent interpretation of Jewish jokes], what is to be made of the numerous versions of the comic tale that have nothing to do with anti-Semitism?" (p. 24). He suspects that Jews tend to Judaize every good joke by injecting it with Jewish content, and suggests a broader investigation of how particular jokes are Judaized.

Chapter 3, "Whatever became of the dirty joke," reexamines the overlooked research topic recently abandoned by scholars as "somewhat polluting" and "as contributing to the objectivisation of women and as instruments of sexual harassment" (p. 31). Despite the idea that dirty jokes are well studied, they are not, as Oring shows, and the description of such jokes in natural face-to-face exchanges is almost non-existent (p. 34). In the chapter, Oring writes extensively on the most famous work on dirty jokes by Gershon Legman to yet show how scant our knowledge on the matter of dirty joke still is. As in many other chapters, he calls folklorists for ethnography as a primary method to study, for instance, individual or group joke repertoires or dirty jokes as communications in real life situations. He finds that folklorists' interest in dirty jokes is to be revived, as the subject is too important to be left solely in the hands of psychoanalysts and psychologists.

Chapter 4, "Incongruous, appropriate, spurious," and Chapter 5, "Overlaps, oppositions, and anthologies" still dwell on humour, yet, on its structural peculiarities. Oring focuses on the appropriate incongruity perspective on jokes, something he has been known for, now supplementing it with another important element—*spuriousness* of the joke and its structure:

¹ This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PSG729 "COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Contents, Channels, and Target Groups".

“The appropriateness established by a pun in a joke, for example, is spurious: it has been established by means that are not considered legitimate or valid in everyday discourse. We do not permit sounds to stand for different concepts in a single bona fide communication” (p. 52). Chapter 4 calls to study the construction of jokes and of how their content is actually structured by looking at their sizeable amount. Critiquing a particular computational approach to the recognition and production of humour (the GTVH and alike; see among others Attardo & Raskin 1991), chapter 5 offers a design for the experiment that involves both human and computational research to study incongruous categories and spurious means.

The first five chapters on humour are followed by the other four, which, as Elliott Oring would rightfully claim in the “Afterword,” might seem to have nothing to do with each other on the first sight. Yet, the last chapters “derive from the reexamination and interrogation of the interpretative mood in folklore studies” (p. 177), including the interrogation of various themes and structural peculiarities of humour. They are also more theoretical and aim to grasp the general laws of folklore, not humour only.

Chapter 6, “Memetics and folkloristics: The theory,” and “Chapter 7, “Memetics and folkloristics: The applications”, re-examine the concept of meme and its applications in folklore studies. These review Richard Dawkin’s *Selfish Gene* (1976) and its main concepts (such as *replicators*, *fecundity*, and *selfish gene* itself) to then turn to what memetics has to do with folklore and can do for folklore studies. Departing from the argument that “memes, in essence, are nothing more than *ideas*” (p. 99), Oring calls for the study of what makes a successful meme and suggests the concept of meme *fitness* to be measured “in terms of its contribution to the survival of its host or to anything else other than its proliferation” (p. 100). After doing the overview of how folklorists have applied memetics in their studies (most frequently of fairy tales and legends), Oring demonstrates a lot of ways of what is still to be done, as “memetics may have some unanticipated benefits in folkloristics”, such as the studies going beyond particular traditions to “macro- and microprocesses of tradition itself” (p. 125).

Chapter 8, “Four laws of folklore” asks if it is possible to view the social world as operated by discernible principles and suggests four laws for folklore: (1) folklore—in whatever form—changes over time; (2) a folk narrative essentially includes an opening and a closing; (3) a ritual has a tripartite structure; and (4) superstition (the term Oring uses deliberately) implies practice or action (such as avoidance behaviour or magical ritual). To me, the latter discussion about the superstition is the most fruitful, as Oring also convincingly argues that “anxiety is [...] displaced into magical practice” (p. 134) and that “when technology and expertise prove insufficient to ensure the positive outcome of an important enterprise, superstition—both individual and communal—will proliferate” (p. 135). He then enumerates other laws that have emerged from folkloristic inquiry (such as Walter Anderson’s law of self-correction, James G. Frazer’s law of sympathetic magic, Michael Owen Jones’s formula for the creation of a folk hero, Vladimir Propp’s law of folklore syntax, etc.) and calls for their investigation, as “the formulation of laws is a stimulus to research” establishing the directions for further inquiry (p. 136). Oring suggests that ethnographic description in the absence of laws and hypotheses remains an ethnographic description only, without concern for a more general human condition.

Chapter 9, “To Explain Tradition”, focuses on the seminal topic of folklore studies and asks why some items of folklore survive and flourish and others go extinct. In a thorough review, Oring deconstructs the ideas of degeneration, adaptation, evolution, innovation of tradition calling for bold research methods of their study, such as an experiment. The “Afterword” once again explains the structure of the book and repeats its main points and the main idea of the book, which is about the need to formulate big questions before “big ideas”. It is then followed by rigorous Notes for every chapter, References, and Index.

All the chapters tackle the topics believed to be successfully theorised and well understood, while, as Oring convincingly shows, they are not. In many cases, Oring is critical of glamorous terms (such as *memes*) and call to “be aware of the theoretical baggage that follows in [their] train” (p. 101). Most chapters follow the scheme of a rigorous review followed by Oring’s own ideas on the matter, and sharp questions yet to be answered. This collection of articles is thus an ideal reference book for the research objects yet to be explored, whether for a student looking for a research topic for the dissertation or a professor thinking of an idea for a research project in humour or folklore study. How particular jokes become Jewish and what relation they bear to the jokes from other thematic cycles? How do women or mixed-gender groupings exchange dirty jokes? How jokes work: how is cultural and linguistic content structured in the creation of jokes? What are the possibilities offered by the computerisation of humour? What constitutes a meme, is a gene-meme analogy appropriate, is a meme in fact a basic unit of culture? If memes are in competition with other memes, what makes a successful competitor? Can memetics help us to understand the macro- and microprocesses of tradition? What ethnography can add to the existing laws of folklore and what laws are yet to be formulated or reformulated? Why are certain children’s rhymes long-lived, and why do these long-lived rhymes come to be replaced by new ones? Why traditions survive or die in particular times? For a student or for a professor, via an experiment or via ethnographic methods, broad and theoretical or highly applied research, “big” or “small” questions—there is something for any research taste in the book. After all, half of the homework is done: not only questions are formulated, but the incredibly thorough research overview is completed on each of them.

Anastasiya Astapova
University of Tartu, Estonia
anastasiya.astapova@ut.ee

References

- Attardo, S. & Raskin, V. (1991). Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 4(3-4), 293-348.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford University Press.