

BOOK REVIEW: THE CONSOLATIONS OF HUMOR AND OTHER
FOLKLORE ESSAYS

Oring, Elliott. 2023. *The Consolations of Humor and Other Folklore Essays*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press. 256 pages.

The readership is divided into those who read the preface and afterword of any book and those who skip them. To the latter, I suggest a change of habits if they wish to enjoy the latest work by the anthropologist Elliott Oring, a professor emeritus at California State University and one of the leading scholars in the field of humour studies. In his own words, “the Afterword should not be skipped, although this recommendation will prove of little value to readers who have already skipped the Preface” (p. xi). The suggestion is reasonable, because the book was not conceived initially as a whole, but rather brings together a series of articles published at different times. The afterword in particular links “the materials in the chapters to related questions, issues, and concerns” (p. xi). Leaving aside these two sections, *The Consolations of Humor and Other Folklore Essays* has nine chapters that can be easily separated into two parts: chapters one to five address jokes, whereas chapters six to nine are devoted to matters of a more theoretical nature. The unifying thread to all is the author’s will to ascertain how folkloristics can contribute to the study of humour. To achieve this goal, Oring continually poses questions that have been left unanswered so far hoping that, by finding their answers, the discipline will move forward.

Chapter 1, “The Consolations of Humor”, offers an interpretation of jokes and anecdotes about the Mormon leader J. Golden Kimball circulating almost exclusively among the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. It is a fine piece of academic writing that provides insight-

ful thoughts on misguided explanations of the genre. A critical assessment of aggression and relief theories is accompanied by the identification of the shortcomings of folkloristics in the study of jokes. The author concludes that jokes do not relieve aggressive or libidinous instincts, but through their unconscious offer the consolation of philosophy, by pointing at unnoticed sides of many aspects of our lives.

“Three Jewish Jokes” is the title of the second chapter. Oring starts by asking himself and the readers what makes a joke Jewish. He then raises questions about how Jewish jokes should be defined and interpreted within the context of an international jokelore. Masterfully resorting to scholarly sources, the author provides non-Jewish versions of anecdotes that traditionally have been considered quintessentially Jewish. As it turns out, the so-called Jewish jokes are, in fact, an extremely widespread set of tales. By highlighting that the motifs are common in world folklore, the author raises a concern “with the question of what makes a ‘Jewish joke’ and the implications of recognizing a Jewish joke as one with close analogues in other languages and cultures” (p. 19). Oring finishes the chapter by claiming that we need to identify clearly what is Jewish about Jewish jokes: “a Jewish joke must rest on more than a mere claim; a broader investigation of the joke is needed” (p. 30).

The third chapter, “Whatever Became of the Dirty Joke?”, looks at the research undertaken so far on dirty jokes to further reflect on how folklorists might contribute to their understanding. Oring expresses

his bewilderment at the fact that folklorists have adopted a psychoanalytic perspective to deal with the genre but have “largely rejected that perspective for practically all other forms of folklore” (p. 170). The author wonders about the scarcity of academic works devoted to the topic and looks for explanations. One of them is that dirty jokes have been thoroughly studied by Freud and therefore it is assumed that further research is not needed. In turn Oring presents an excellent revision of Freud’s remarks on the subject and its weaknesses when dealing with this kind of joke. He then proceeds to examine the contributions of folklore to the study of these jokes and expresses his doubts about the role of jokes as cathartically alleviating unconscious tensions. He believes instead that they are rather a way of philosophically dealing with certain aspects of reality. Thus, dirty jokes “fall heavily in the province of folklore” and should not “be left solely in the hands of psychoanalysts and psychologists” (p. 45).

Chapter 4 is named “Incongruous, Appropriate, Spurious”. After pondering the usefulness of concepts such as incongruity and appropriateness in the study of verbal humour, the author proposes yet another analytical dimension: spuriousness. Oring is of the opinion that

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)

He emphasises that although incongruity has been profusely studied, the notion of spuriousness has been altogether overlooked. However, it helps to better devise the mechanisms at work in a joke, especially when incongruity is not sufficient.

In chapter 5, “Overlaps, Oppositions, and Ontologies: The General Theory of Verbal Humor Revisited”, Oring discusses the

Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) and the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH). Firstly, he assesses a series of notions: “oppositions” and “overlaps”, quintessential to the formulation of the SSTH, on the one hand, and the concept of “logical mechanism”, a novel element provided by GTVH to replace SSTH’s “script overlap”, on the other. All of them share certain shortcomings in regards to their definition and application that, as has been noted by critics (Oring among them), render them insufficient to fully conceptualise verbal humour (unless combined with the notions of appropriate incongruity and spuriousness, devised by the author). The discussion is then extended to the computer-based implementation of the above-mentioned theories. The efforts of computational linguists, under the auspices of the Ontological Semantics Theory of Humour (OSTH) and sustained by the SSHT and the GTVH, are questioned due to difficulties in reducing the recognition of a humorous text to a computer algorithm. Oring considers their task to be daunting and is sceptical about its accomplishment if such a computer model is to be built on these theories.

In chapter 6, “Memetics and Folkloristics: The Theory”, the author takes an interest in “what the idea of memes and the science of memetics might contribute to the field of folkloristics” (p. 88). He then critically examines the concept of the *meme* proposed by Richard Dawkins. To Oring, the notion raises a series of doubts that he brilliantly identifies. He argues that without a precise definition of the term it is unlikely that memetics can make much progress. Regarding replication, for instance, he notes that sometimes memes spread only a part of a certain product (for example the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony but not the whole symphony), and cultural transmission, as Oring points out, “is often not a matter of imitation at all” (p. 94). It is rather related to the ability to recreate, which puts the notion of fidelity – of great impor-

tance for genetics – at stake. Some other disputable topics concern the truth of memes, its goodness or evilness or the not-so-clear distinction between a meme and a virus. The author believes that the term meme should not be idly employed and that folklorists “should be aware of the theoretical baggage that follows in its train” (p. 101).

The lengthy chapter 7, “Memetics and Folkloristics: The Applications”, examines in detail four attempts to apply Dawkins’s conceptualisation to specific folklore materials. Oring observes that the analogy between biology and culture raises concerns and identifies common problems in all the applications. On the one hand, the word meme is used as new terminology for ideas and information that have been used previously under other names. On the other, it asserts, though without demonstrating, that natural selection is operative in the evolution of culture. At the moment of writing Oring does not devise clearly how memetics can benefit folkloristics, but he does not adopt a closed-minded attitude: “memetics may have some unanticipated benefits in folkloristics” (p. 125).

The eighth chapter, “Four Laws of Folklore”, highlights previous attempts by folklorists to identify laws that govern the operation of their subject matter, such as the law put forward by the Danish folklorist Axel Olrik that in any folk narrative, “there will be at most two characters with distinct identities” (p. 130). It also challenges the reluctance of folklorists to examine these laws critically or to propose and test new ones. Oring enumerates the laws formulated and studies the efforts made to operate according to them. Surprisingly, there has been “no systematic effort to see to what extent [these laws] hold” (p. 130) nor to theorise around them. Nevertheless, the author believes that “the formulation of laws might lead to a reimagining of folkloristics” (p. 128).

In the final chapter, “To Explain Tradition”, the author accounts for the contribution that folklore can make to the study of

tradition. He raises an old question of vital importance to his mind: how is it that certain beliefs and practices are marginalised and abandoned while others are not? The chapter opens with an excellent reflection on the definition and meaning of tradition and its relation to culture. Oring argues that the study of tradition is “a truly contemporary subject” that can “make a major contribution to the understanding of society if it could explain the persistence, the marginalization, the death and the revival of cultural ideas and practices” (p. 139). Despite the longevity and centrality of this issue to the field, it has not been rigorously studied, if at all. The chapter lays out the problem and suggests some of the means that might be marshalled in responding to it. In essence Oring argues that the question of how and why traditions persist or die must be substantially addressed by folklorists if they continue to employ the word “tradition” as a part of the definition of their enterprise.

To sum up, *The Consolations of Humor and Other Folklore Essays* is another Oring contribution to folklore studies, humour studies and social theory that draws meaningfully from the three. The book unfolds a series of questions, commentaries and criticisms of the analysis, interpretation, and explanation of folklore. While recognising the study of jokes and other forms of folklore as a humanities endeavour, the author believes in the relevance of a scientific perspective on the enterprise. Written in a sophisticated yet accessible style, the book stimulates both scholars and students alike and contributes to the creation of more robust folkloristics, particularly in its relation to the study of humour, in the 21st century.

Guillem Castañar
University of Tartu