Book review

Attardo, Salvatore (2023). *Humour 2.0: How the Internet Changed Humour.*
Anthem Press.

Salvatore Attardo needs no introduction among humour scholars. One book after another, one paper after another, he has managed to become an inspiration for most (if not all) of us, whether we agree or disagree with his arguments and positions. His latest book is definitely different from the previous ones: while the previous ones had a pronounced linguist/pragmatic/semiotic orientation and their content was clearly and strongly related mostly to linguistic theory/ies via theoretical and methodological proposals, exhaustive lists of references, and meticulous analyses of data, this one reveals a different identity of Attardo as a scholar. In what follows, I will try to explain in detail how this has occurred.

Attardo begins his monograph in a rather unconventional way: after mentioning its origins (i.e. a conference paper and a course; see p. 1), in the Introduction, he does not proceed with a detailed theoretical grounding of the book and a description of its content. Instead, he states its limitations with most welcome sincerity and directness: he admits that the book is shaped by US centrism and its author's linguistic perspective (not sociological, anthropological, folkloristic, or historical); that he considers the data examined as authentic in the sense that an (often anonymous) user has created them and put them into circulation; and that the book includes discriminatory data and quotes non-academic sources wherever necessary. All these points seem to pre-empt potential (and, to be honest, not always constructive) criticism, and simultaneously manage to provide the framework within which Attardo and all of us who deal with data from online sources work.

The actual introduction to the content of the book is included in Chapter 1 "Humour and the internet", where the author briefly explains how the development of Web 2.0 has enabled the active participation of users and, most importantly in the present context, has led to the emergence of new forms and uses of humorous discourse. The main research question of the monograph is formulated as follows: "[t]here is a widespread perception that humour on the internet is different than it was before. This book is dedicated to this question, examining many cases of internet humour to see to what extent humour-on-the-internet is different from humour-before-the-internet" (p. 18). Then, Attardo starts presenting some of the main topics that will be analysed in more detail later on: memes, the fast, ephemeral, interactive, anonymous, and multimodal nature of internet humour, new humorous genres, and their emerging stock characters and aesthetics (or absence thereof).

Chapter 2 "Memetics" is dedicated to the process of meme production or *memeiosis*, as Attardo calls it (pp. 24-25). The chapter offers descriptive definitions of terminology often associated with memeiosis such as *founder/anchor memes*, *virality*, *affordances*, *intertextuality*, *remixing*, *mashup*, and *invention*. All such processes have become much faster, simpler, and popular thanks to the openly accessible and usually user-friendly software available online.

In Chapter 3 "Humour theory", Attardo summarises the three main theories of humour (release, superiority, and incongruity) to theoretically contextualise the ensuing analytical observations. Not only does he provide enlightening examples for the theories, but also connects

them to related theoretical concepts such as *disposition theory*, *incongruity resolution*, *playfulness*, *stereotypes*, and Grice's (1975) *cooperative principle*.

The rest of the book is divided into 4 parts, each of them focusing on different aspects of internet humour. Part 1 (Chapters 4-10) pertains to the new genres of internet humour. Chapter 4 "The new language of humour" explores the (minimal) effects of the internet on language during the past few decades. Attardo refers to internet slang as the informal and innovative linguistic variety used in online environments, as well as to emoticons, emojis, and acronyms (e.g. *LOL*) as markers of humour, among other things. The relevant research cited places emphasis on the metalinguistic function of such features for phatic, emotional, empathetic, and amusement purposes. In online humorous communication, meaning seems to be "the outcome of a *soft assembly*, an unplanned process, which takes advantage of whatever the environment is (the users, the affordances of the technology, etc.) to convey the social, interactional aspects of meaning", as Attardo remarks (p. 58, my emphasis). Finally, he notes that the speed at which such elements emerge and spread remains under-researched so far.

In Chapter 5 "The compilation", the author begins with examining compilations of short digital videos to narrow down his focus to *fails*, namely short video clips including somebody's unsuccessful attempt at performing something. Superiority and incongruity theories are employed to account for humour in such humorous texts.

Webcomics is the topic of Chapter 6 "Internet cartoons", that is, comics that are specifically created to circulate online. Attardo perceives this genre to be a result of *narrowcasting*, namely the distribution of content to groups with specific, niche interests. Artists no longer need to find publishers to publish their humorous creations, thus potentially addressing a much larger and perhaps specialised audience, who may have been unapproachable in pre-digital, print media times.

Chapter 7 on "Stuff White People Like" contains a critical discussion of this humorous blog as well as of previous studies analysing the blog in question. This blog provides Attardo the opportunity to scrutinise the overlap between classist and racist humour and the emerging contradictory interpretations. The case study is most interesting and the author's observations valuable for those who investigate both kinds of humour, which are premised on naturalised ideologies which may remain unquestioned, if one does not adopt a critical perspective on humour.

Perhaps one of the most unexpected and creative genres of internet humour has been "Dogecoin, the joke currency" (Chapter 8), namely the joke cryptocurrency originating in a meme cycle where the main character is an anthropomorphic dog talking to himself. It seems that for a few years people were buying this joke cryptocurrency with real money. The connection between the popularity of Dogememes and the popularity of Dogecoin is indeed one of the most incongruous applications of internet humour so far, showing the immense potential of humour nowadays and the creative ways it is exploited to promote various products and ideas.

In Chapter 9 "The spoiler alert", Attardo examines the spoiler alert as a humorous genre, which has gained prominence ever since "popular culture is no longer consumed synchronically by the public" (p. 93) and "anyone with access to Facebook or Twitter can provide their review of a movie or book they have just seen or read" (p. 95). The humorous potential of spoiler alerts emerges when they are taken to extremes as shown in the video from *Key & Peele* commented upon in this chapter.

Chapter 10 "Satirical news websites and fake news" concentrates on the difficulty some people face in distinguishing between real/journalistic news and satirical news. The generic form these genres share as well as the "erosion of the fact/fiction boundary" (p. 103) may lead readers to mix up satirical news with fake news and interpret the former's content as accurate. This is particularly important if we take into consideration that a significant number of people,

especially young ones, prefer satirical news as sources of information on socio-political affairs to journalist news (see among others Balmas, 2014; Knoblock-Westerwick & Lavis, 2017; Doona, 2021).

Part 2 (Chapters 11-16) is dedicated to various kinds and aspects of meme(iosi)s. In Chapter 11, Attardo returns to the discussion of the similarities between joke cycles and meme cycles (see also Attardo, 2020). According to his findings, in both kinds of cycles, from an anchor joke/meme, we may get two types of derivative jokes/memes: *intertextual* ones, which retain the initial format to enable readers to make sense of them, but change the humorous targets or other features of the anchor joke/meme; and *metajokes/metamemes*, which may be reminiscent of the anchor joke, but end up delivering a different joke, thus violating the expectations readers have developed due to their familiarity with the anchor joke/meme and/or the intertextual ones. Interestingly, Attardo accounts for such processes in terms of *semantic bleaching* (Bybee, 2015) and *grammaticalisation* (Hopper & Traugott, 2003/1993): due to the mixing and recontextualisation of the anchor joke/meme, its initial meaning/s is/are lost and the joke/meme structure becomes a template for further creative exploitation (see also Tsakona to appear).

"The saga of Boaty McBoatface" (Chapter 12) becomes the pretext for Attardo's discussion about online flash mobs and collaborative pranks. Different institutions or companies seem to have launched open polls to enhance their popularity for free with humorous results: online participants voted for comic or satirical product names, etc., which were eventually ignored by the institutions/companies in the latter's effort to maintain a 'serious' profile. In his account of such cases, the author suggests that online participants act like members of a *flash mob*, namely "a public gathering of complete strangers, organised via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again" (p. 125) with the intention of "surprising the onlookers" (p. 126); or they act like performing a collaborative prank, where their partners (i.e. the institution or company launching the poll) are not aware of the play frame introduced by the online participants.

In Chapter 13 "A General Theory of Grumpy Cats", Attardo goes beyond the funniness of Grumpy Cat memes to explore why cats are popular in internet memes and other genres. He first identifies anthropomorphism as the core of such humour: "people recognise the expression of the cat because it matches the facial expression that in humans is associated with bad (grumpy) mood" (p. 113). The popularity of the cat-related memes can also be accounted for in terms of the "monetisation of cuteness" (p. 137): cat photos or cartoons become popular and lucrative because they are associated with cuteness and light-heartedness providing "a form of relief from 'doom scrolling', that is, the practice of spending excessive amount of time absorbing negative news or posts and more broadly from the alienating effects of modern life" (p. 138).

In Chapter 14 "The Pastafarian memeplex: Joke religion as a system", the author examines the Pastafarian (joke) religion and accounts for its success by using the concept of *memeplex*, that is, a cluster of mutually supporting memes (in the original Dawkinian sense, namely as not necessarily funny reproducible cultural units; Dawkins, 1976). Pastafarianism is indeed based on a number of humorous incongruities parodying central tenets and ways of thinking and speaking which are common in Christianity or other 'non-humorous' religions. This chapter gives Attardo the opportunity to point out a difference between a humorous Dawkinian meme (in the present case, Pastafarianism) and an internet meme (such as Boaty McBoatface or Grumpy Cat above): "the difference lies in the fact that internet memes are fads", while "Dawkinian memes are not just fads, that is, they establish a sufficiently persistent interest such that they keep being actively present in the cultural environment" (p. 145). This is indeed one of the most thought-provoking and worthy of further investigation observations put forward by Attardo concerning the conditions and prerequisites of a persistent meme or memeplex. It also makes us wonder what is the difference between a humorous memeplex and a meme cycle (see

Chapter 11): Why do memeplexes manage to remain popular, while meme cycles usually fade out after a while? The latter's dependence on news reports about events that are not considered to be important or timely after a while could perhaps be an answer or future research hypothesis (see among others Tsakona 2018; 2020). Dawkinian memes are not originally related to specific events, but they themselves constitute the tellable humorous event or script that is elaborated on via the (re)production of thematically related (Dawkinian) memes.

Chapter 15 "When Chuck Norris is waiting, Godot comes" examines the Chuck Norris meme cycle by tracing its origins and evolution as well as the reasons which led to the popularity of this cycle and, later on, to its decline.

In the final chapter of the second part, Chapter 16 "The half-life of a meme: The rise and fall of memes", Attardo addresses the central questions of why certain memes become popular and why later on they become *dank*, namely they go out of fashion, in more traditional terms. Attardo explains that the term *viral* is not accidentally employed to describe the lifecycle of memes: they spread at an exponential rate, just like viruses. He also refers to the reasons for this development, including, among other things, their tendency to form clusters (see *memeplexes* and *meme cycles* above), their simplicity, novelty/distinctiveness, and usefulness, the high arousal emotions they may cause, and the positive self-image attributed to their producers.

Part 3 on "Multimodality" (Chapters 17-21) concentrates on multimodality as a factor enhancing the semiotic means humourists have at their disposal when creating internet humour. The first dataset examined in Chapter 17 "Hitler's opinion on the parking situation in Tel Aviv" involves the *Hitler Rants* parodies, which are based on the addition of irrelevant, and hence parodic, subtitles to a scene of the film *Downfall*, where Hitler is represented to react violently to the realisation of his defeat in the battle of Berlin, leading to the end of World War II. Attardo's analysis brings to the surface those semiotic particularities that turn a dramatic scene into a humorous text, including, among other things, the emotional distance created in the parodic texts, the intertextual references to trivial contemporary issues humour is built on (e.g. finding a parking space in Tel Aviv), and the multiple and polysemous script oppositions emerging from the parodies, all contributing to various reactions to them ranging from humorous to non-humorous ones.

In Chapter 18 "Photobombing as figure ground reversal", Attardo accounts for the humorous dimension of photobombing by employing the logical mechanism of figure/ground reversal originating in Gestalt psychology (Wever, 1927). In photobombing, "what should have been an unremarkable element of the ground becomes a figure, but a parasitic one: it is not the intended figure, which the photographer had chosen, framed the image around, etc." (p. 183). Moreover, he makes a distinction between *intentional* photobombing, where people deliberately insert themselves in photos where they are not supposed to be, and *unintentional* photobombing, where, for example, animals happen to enter photo frames.

Cringe humour could not be missing from Attardo's analytical endeavours (Chapter 19 "'Hard to watch': Cringe and embarrassment humour"). Definitely under-researched and only recently introduced as a technical term, cringe humour refers to instances of humour where "the hearer experiences vicarious embarrassment on behalf of one or some of the participants in the humour" (p. 190). Embarrassment as a social emotion resulting from the violation of social rules appear to be a more or less expected source of humour, but, at the same time, seems to work differently from the emotion of mirth usually associated with humour. The author convincingly argues that the analysis of cringe humour invites us to reconsider previous theoretical claims such as Bergson's (1911/1901) insensitivity of laughter and McGraw & Warren's (2010) *benign violation theory*, both framing psychological distance as the prerequisite of humour. Cringe humour is closely connected to our emotions and confirms the social dimension of humour (see among others Bergson 1911/1901). In this context, it comes as a surprise that Billig's (2005)

conceptualisation of humour as a means of embarrassment and eventually of deterring people from violating social rules is only mentioned in a brief footnote (p. 190). In an extensive study, Billig (2005, p. 231), among other things, connects disciplinary humour to embarrassment:

> The social order is reinforced when the new group member unwittingly disrupts its accepted practices. The observers stand back and laugh at the resulting confusion and embarrassment. They are not outraged, but amused. They can enjoy the disruption vicariously. In this enjoyment can be detected, not just the mockery that ensures the reproduction of the social order, but a rebellious delight in seeing the order disrupted.

Obviously, there are similarities and differences between Attardo's and Billig's conceptualisations of the relationship between humour and embarrassment, which are definitely worthy of further investigation via cringe or other kinds of humour.

Chapter 20 on "Humour videos" focuses on three kinds of them: Vine 6-second looped video clips, which mostly involve physical humour or absurd interactions; remixing rants into music, where adding music to a video or turning its dialogue into a song are usually the main sources of humour; and the Lego Rammstein video, where the original videoclip of a Rammstein song is reproduced using Lego bricks and figures, thus parodying the initial version and its hypermasculine imagery.

From humour videos the reader moves on to "Reaction videos" (Chapter 21), whose humour is based on the incongruity created by the fact that we watch a video of someone reacting to something, usually another video – and this could turn out to be a kind of cringe humour (see Chapter 19). Among the different kinds of reaction videos, the author examines videos reacting to stupidity, counter-trolling ones, and videos where so-called "tribal people" react to aspects of western culture. What seems to bring such videos together, besides the 'double' video effect, is the denigration of specific persons or groups, usually with racist, sexist, or other discriminatory overtones. Thus, the chapter on reaction videos paves the way for more openly and aggressively 'dark' humour, which is explored in the fourth and final part of the book titled "The dark side of internet humour" (Chapters 22-24).

In Chapter 22 "The use of humour by the alt-right", Attardo elaborates on online humour as a means for promoting alt-right propaganda and recruiting and radicalising supporters. Such use of humour seems to be widespread nowadays (at least in the US) and significantly contributes to the naturalisation of white supremacy and Nazi propaganda. Once again, Attardo joins critical humour studies (see also Chapters 7 and 21) scrutinising discriminatory and othering uses of humour (see Weaver, 2016; Archakis & Tsakona, 2019, 2021; Pérez, 2023, and references therein). He argues that disclaimers such as *I was joking* and *just kidding* as well as the question of "freedom of expression" often raised in such cases are "irrelevant" (p. 222):

> in our discussion of memetic virality, forwarding a meme implies endorsing the content and the credibility of the source from where we received the meme […]. [I]f one jokes about a topic or if one exercises their freedom of speech to talk about a topic, one becomes associated with the kind of people that do those things, applaud them and agree with them, and the circumstances in which they do so. In other words, if fascists, white supremacists or misogynists are your audience, they agree with what you say, and you move in their milieu, then you are a fascist, while supremacist, misogynist, etc., regardless of what your stated intentions may have been. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck… (p. 222).

Indeed, disclaimers such as the above and discussions concerning the freedom of speech remind us of more traditional perceptions of humour as *non bona fide communication* (Raskin, 1985) and *playful aggression* (Davies, 1998), which attempt to downplay and trivialise the

significant role discriminatory humour plays in perpetuating social inequalities and in disguising offence and bigotry as 'the right to speak' or 'the right to laugh' (see Billig, 2005; Archakis & Tsakona, 2019, 2021; Ervine, 2019; Pérez, 2022, and references therein). Obviously, Attardo and all of us working on the (socio)pragmatics of humour (among other disciplines) are most familiar with its potential to perform multiple sociopolitical functions, including 'dark' and discriminatory ones, and here he points not only to such functions but also to the potential of humour to discursively construct diverse social identities (see among others Archakis & Tsakona, 2012, and references therein).

Chapter 23 "4chan, trolls and lulz: Fascists at play" is dedicated to various practices that are here classified as 'dark' humour and attributed to the alt-right and fascist propaganda. In a fascinating discussion, Attardo points out the overlap among *trolling*, *flaming*, *cyberbullying*, *hacktivism*, *shitposting*, and *hate-watching*, all fostered by the anonymity and lack of moderation occurring in certain online platforms and guaranteeing the impunity of the posters. Emphasis is placed on trolling not only due to its lack of solid definition, but also due to its connection with widespread and omnipresent fascist ideologies and anti-social behaviour in general. Attardo claims that "[w]hile trolling that punches up shows that trolling is not necessarily a right-wing practice, it seems clear that there is a much stronger affinity and connection between the trolling subculture and the alt-right" (p. 228).

The final chapter of the book (Chapter 24 "Pepe, Kek and friends") refers to "the adoption of cartoon mascots by US right-wing groups" (p. 239). It seems that such groups have updated their recruitment and propaganda methods: they take advantage of the popularity of memes and memetic characters, and use them to pursue their political agenda. To this end, Pepe the Frog, Wojak, Chad, Doomer Girl, and Rage Guy have been appropriated and politicised by the alt-right. The author also refers to another humorous religion, namely the *Cult of Kek and Kekistan* promoting Nazi ideologies and using the Ancient Egyptian deity Keke, Adolf Hitler, Donald Trump, and Pepe the Frog to create humorous memes as part of their humorous religious fantasy.

In the "Conclusion: Plus ça change…" chapter, Attardo states that, even though the main theories of humour can still be employed to account for the data examined in this monograph, "what our culture in the first two decades of the new millennium finds appropriate as the object of humour has changed" (p. 249). According to his summary, this is mostly due to (a) the emergence of the humorous internet meme; (b) the mainstreaming of cringe humour; (c) the blurring of the boundary play and real-life aggression (e.g. between real/journalistic and satirical news and between joke and white supremacy propaganda); and (d) the emergence of crowd-sourced productions establishing online communities based on shared interests and experiences and facilitated by the affordances of the new media.

The book covers a wide range of topics and concepts used for the analysis of internet humour and I am positive that there cannot be any reader (whether expert one working on internet humour or non-expert one interested in it) who will not find something of interest in it to read. It is written in short, easy-to-read chapters, so readers can focus on what interests them most and take one step at a time with their reading. This, however, can simultaneously be a kind of a disadvantage for the readers: by reading the chapters separately, readers will miss important connections between different chapters and case studies, where Attardo gradually develops his perspective and builds his argumentation.

Even though from the beginning of the book Attardo highlights its linguistic orientation, this is not at all accurate – and this is one of the most significant assets of the book: its interdisciplinarity cannot but be praised. The book provides us with historical information for many of the phenomena examined as well as with useful references for further reading on all the topics from a wide range of research areas (sociology, political studies, folklore, media studies, psychology, philosophy, literary studies, to name but a few). Thus, he manages not only

to attract readers from different disciplines, but also to contextualise the data examined using pieces of information that are most probably not known to the wider audience and eventually allow them to connect current online humorous practices with their pre-internet versions or their original sources outside/beyond the internet. On the other hand, in Attardo's effort to appeal to a non-expert audience (see p. 4), some references are unfortunately omitted (e.g. on Plato, Aristotle, Freud, Goffman, and grammaticalisation).

His effort to appeal to a larger audience also brings to the limelight another important feature of the book: Attardo's own humour! In many cases, his comments on the narrated events or funny asides including details from his experience while researching for this book or writing it (*jab lines* would be the technical term, I guess) are, in my view, hilarious and disclose what I think often happens to all of us who call ourselves humour scholars: we often laugh a lot at our data – and this is one of the main attractions of being a humour scholar (if not the most important one).

In sum, Attardo offers a fascinating and most inspiring snapshot of contemporary internet humour. It would be most useful –and definitely a challenge for him- to start preparing a second volume (rather than edition) to be published in ten years from now or so, highlighting the new developments in, and genres of, such humour. Needless to say, Attardo anticipated this thought as well: "the next edition […] will be written by an AI pretending to be me. However, you will know if I have been replaced by a sentient web page from the quality of the jokes…" (p. 9). We are already looking forward to reading the *authentic* Attardo version of the next book.

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