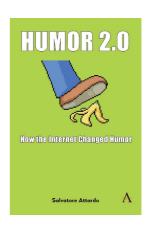# BOOK REVIEW

## HOW THE INTERNET CHANGED HUMOR

**Salvatore Attardo. *Humor 2.0: How the internet changed humor*. Anthem Press, 2023. 286 pp.**

An account of how the internet has changed humour has been waited for. There is a lacuna in the overarching yet theory-driven understanding of the varied humour-related phenomena online. Salvatore Attardo's recent book Humor 2.0 is aimed, as the author states in the introduction, at two types of audience: a general audience interested in a serious discussion of the topic of humour in the age of the internet, and scholars from various disciplines. To be accessible for the former (but why not also the latter), the language used in the book is light and easily readable. Both mentioned groups should enjoy this quite rare feature of a scholarly book, even more so as the book puts forth ideas and provokes discussions among those who have picked it up and are curious about how, then, has the internet changed humour.

The book starts off with a compulsory overview of what is the internet and how it has developed since 1989. It states that the impact of internet on any walk of life is enormous: it's difficult to find examples of activities that have remained completely unaffected by it. Among other things, it's fair to assume that it has affected how we produce, consume, and react to humour. The author warns, however, that even though the internet has brought along changes in humour (new genres like memes, or ways of displaying laughter like emojis, etc), the changes haven't affected the deep-lying semantic mechanisms of humour. The readers should take his word for that, because Attardo is a renowned scholar who, together with other humour-researching linguists, had formulated an influential linguistic theory of humour (or more specifically the Script-Based Theory of Humour, SSHT). He then provides a loose list of things related to humour that are now different that they used to be: the meme and other new genres have evolved, the ways humour is produced and consumed have been affected, new characters have transpired, language has changed, multimodality has come to stay, and so on. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. Attardo then moves on to explaining memeiosis, or meme production, naming techniques (like remix) that are often used in the process. A tip for those who want to get most of the theory in advance: Chapter 16 also deals with the theory of memes, more specifically their lifespan; this could well be a continuation of the memeiosis. He concludes there that memes spread very fast and fall out of fashion (the former being more exponential and the latter more skewed) because they evoke

a strong emotional response, which leads to exponentially increased sharing, and then dies off when next memes take their place. The last 10 pages of the Introductory section are dedicated to an overview of humour theories.

The rest of the book is divided into four major parts; these are titled *New genres*; *Memes and more memes*, *Multimodality*, and finally, *The dark side of internet humour*. In Part 1, Attardo considers a number of features and types of texts that have emerged on the internet. The more clearly outlined ones have been given their own chapters: the compilation, internet cartoons, satirical and/or fake news, or very specific phenomena like dogecoin and the blog Stuff white people like. In these chapters, he makes observations about the specific features of new genres, for example acknowledging the central role of incongruity and superiority of humour in compilations of fail videos.

Part 2 is dedicated entirely to memes. They are referred to as "arguably the most Web 2.0 innovation in humor" (p. 108), and this statement is backed up by the first chapter that deals with specifically meme-related features: the formation of meme cycles, the idea of the memetic drift (when an anchor meme is progressively surrounded and possibly displaced by other, related memes), faulty grammatical constructions, and semantic bleaching (when the original meaning or usage is forgotten or lost in the process of the memetic drift). The idea of memeiosis is further elaborated in this chapter, suggesting that this process is an extension of the memetic drift, including also the intertextual and meta-textual appearances of the original meme. Attardo follows the argument by discussing a number of concrete examples: Grumpy cats (and why they are funny?), pastafarians, or Chuck Norris memes. In the first of these, he introduces the history of displaying cats in culture and arts, and then summarises that cats have came to stay in the meme business because they are cute and (not unimportantly) lucrative. The author's final conviction is that Tardar Sauce a.k.a. Grumpy Cat is funny because of the basic script opposition between old / young and animal / human, and as a non-threatening target it provides a relief from "doom scrolling" (or the almost obsessive practice of observing one's social media feed's negative news and posts). However, as the funniness of the cats is not only embedded their visual representation, the argument does not fully cover the whole spectrum of internet cats. Captions are often responsible for at least some of the humour in Grumpy cat (see eg Vásquez & Aslan 2021).

Part 3 addresses multimodality as one of the central features of internet humour, and the specific genres relying on multimodality: e.g. embarrassment videos (or cringe comedy), photobombing, video parody. He stresses the importance of context – the author, the intended audience, etc – in interpreting video parodies, eg the Downfall meme. When discussing photobombing, Attardo relates this to the figure ground reversal mechanism known from humour theory. He stresses that the popular genre of cringe comedy can't be explained by Schadenfreude but rather the opposite – a feeling of sympathetic embarrassment. He extends this to a discussion of humour videos in general, especially the emotional rants and reaction videos, all of which play on the empathy of the viewers.

The final Part 4 focuses on the dark and disturbing corners of the internet, which, as he rightly contends, need to be examined and at least academically understood, even if one does not share the "paleolithic sense of humour" (Sienkiewicz & Marx 2022) they employ. It follows the recent trend of writing and studying alt-right and other politically incorrect humour (ibid.) that for long now does not hide in the darkest corners any more but are out there for anyone to see. He turns to 4chan for his data on shitposting and trolling, and delineates their (small but not insignificant) differences: while shitposting is humour-oriented, the aim of trolling is more straightforwardly antagonistic. This kind of humour verging on aggressiveness functions as an in-group strengthener meant to foster a sense of belonging in an online community. Probably because they are disguised as humour, it fulfils its role much better than simple aggression.

The general audience might gain more from this book than academics as the light-heartedness and sometimes excessively condensed and/or brief way of addressing the (no doubt) vast number of types and genres available on the internet takes over the rigorous academic discussion promised in the outset of the book. On the whole, it is an interesting, yet quite a subjective list of "things a humour scholar has seen" on the internet. To back these observations up, the author has added links to websites, videos, and memes (not all of which are still functional). A good move would have been to put all web addresses in footnotes. In the print version, as much as one would like to, it isn't possible to click on the links anyway to find out more.

Attardo concludes the book with the same question he set out to seek an answer to: how has the internet changed humour? Having gone through all the numerous examples – hilarious, funny, strange, annoying (and everything in between) - he contends that although there are a lot of changes in how humour looks like, the basic features have remained unchanged. People still seek out humour, want to be amused and uplifted, and the underlying mechanisms of humour are the same. On an optimistic note, he finally states that humour is, after all, the highest expression of collective humanity, and all the aggressive, cringe, dank, ugly and cruel humour is just a phase, or – as a reader comment he aptly cites – "being an asshole is the new funny."

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## References

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