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Chapter 3

Humor and Mirth

Abstract: Humor is ever present in the contemporary media environment. A wide range of scholarly disciplines have studied humor and laughter in overlapping yet complementary ways. Departing from the traditional approaches that define humor based on laughter, this chapter shifts towards an understanding of humor based on mirth, the characteristic feeling of amusement resulting from humor. Building on refereed volumes in humor studies, foundational and contemporary theories of humor and mirth are reviewed, specifically the “big three” theories of superiority, relief, and incongruity. Dominant disciplinary approaches to humor in psychology, linguistics, and sociology are summarized, and current critiques are discussed. The chapter ends with some provocations for future studies on mediated humor.

Keywords: humor, mirth, laughter, entertainment, incongruity

Readers might find it hard to imagine popular arts and entertainment without also thinking about humor and comedy. In fact, comedy is often the most preferred and sought after genre across entertainment formats (e.g., Dutton & Blank, 2014; Zillmann, 2000). Beyond comedic genres, humor permeates all entertainment genres, with new genres of humor being continuously negotiated in the transforming landscape of digitally mediated entertainment (Tsakona, 2017a). Evidently, humor is central to entertainment media, and more broadly to creative endeavors in general—in his book *The Act of Creation*, philosopher Arthur Koestler claimed humor as one of the three domains of creativity, other than discovery and art (Koestler, 1964). If entertainment through media is “a form of playing, i.e., a form of coping with reality” as described by Vorderer (2001, p. 256), then the phenomenon of humor, as a form of pleasurable and social play (Martin & Ford, 2018a), is an important, if not indispensable, constituent of entertainment media.

As is custom, let us start with a definition: what is humor? Frustratingly yet not surprisingly, this textbook question does not have a textbook answer. A common conundrum in defining humor has been that not all that is considered humorous leads to laughter, and not all that leads to laughter is considered humorous (Shaw, 2010). Exploring the gap between what is considered humorous and what is considered laughable gets us to the concept of *mirth*—the characteristic pleasurable *emotion* that is felt when humor is perceived. Laughter, then, is simply an outward physiological expression of the emotion of mirth, and the felt mirth might or might not lead to laughter (Martin & Ford, 2018b). Putting these pieces together simplistically, humor can be defined as *the phenomenon that elicits mirth*. This solipsistic definition of humor anchors on the *experience* of humor as its definitive characteristic, and thus

might be a sufficiently precise definition of humor for the purpose of studying entertainment experiences.

Humor studies has spanned a wide range of scholarly disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, medicine, philosophy, philology, mathematics, education, semiotics, and linguistics (Raskin, 2008). Within the tradition of entertainment media scholarship originating from media psychology, questions about mediated humorous entertainment can find their roots dominantly in the disciplinary traditions of psychology (e.g., how do humans process humor?), linguistics (e.g., what are the necessary verbal and textual conditions for humor?), and sociology (e.g., what are the functions of humor in society?). This chapter introduces these dominant disciplinary approaches to humor, and discusses foundational and contemporary theories of humor and mirth. Building on past reviews and volumes in humor studies (Martin & Ford, 2018a; McGhee, 1979; Raskin, 2008), contemporary research on humor in entertainment media, or specifically comedy, is reviewed, along with a discussion of current open research questions and critiques in entertainment media research.

1 What Is Mirth?

In a reflection on three decades of psychological research in humor, pioneering humor researcher Rod Martin described mirth as a characteristic emotional component of the phenomenon of humor:

The cognitive processes [of humor] activate a unique emotional response, which I refer to as “mirth.” In the English language, this word “mirth” has a long lineage and seems to be perfect as a technical term for this emotional aspect of humor. Mirth is related to joy, but is somewhat different because of the element of “funniness” involved. It is accompanied by activation of the pleasure circuits in the limbic system as well as various autonomic and endocrine responses, and is what makes humor so enjoyable. (Martin & Kuiper, 2016, p. 502)

Laughter, in Martin’s conceptualization, is a “hard-wired nonverbal expression or communication of the emotion of mirth,” such that the act of laughing “can also intensify and amplify the emotion of mirth” (Martin & Kuiper, 2016, p. 502). Consistent with Martin, a large body of psychophysiological research on humor partitions the phenomenon of humor into the stimulus (humor), the emotional response (mirth), and the physical response (laughter). More recently, neuropsychological research has investigated distinguishing neural and physiological components of humor processing with mirth as the characteristic feeling of pleasure generated by humor (e.g., Amir et al., 2013). It is in this tradition of research that a distinction has been made between *mirthful* laughter, i.e., laughter arising from mirth, and *mirthless* laughter, laughter arising from alternative processes which are non-humorous (Fry, 2002). This distinction is crucial, as it detaches the phenomenon of humor from the expression of laughter—(mirthless) laughter can exist without humor.

This chapter insists on a focus on mirth, instead of laughter, as the defining experience of humor in mediated entertainment. This is a shift from dominant traditions in humor studies which have focused on the study of laughter, without clear commitments to the study of mirth. Davis (2008) detected that even in his formative work on humor, McGhee (1979) chose to exclude the concept of mirth from the “intellectual play”-based definition of humor, and instead attributed mirthful laughter to “one’s gay mood and a sense of fun and amusement” (McGhee, 1979, p. 8). Nevertheless, theories of laughter in the context of humor have effectively been exploring mirthful laughter and have attempted to ascertain essential conditions for the existence of humor and mirth. While these theories were introduced with a variety of different names and under diverse epistemological purviews, they conveniently fall under three broad categories: *superiority*, *relief*, and *incongruity*. As discussed in the next section, these “big three” theoretical explanations of mirthful laughter constitute an adequately exhaustive shorthand to interpret dominant disciplinary approaches in humor studies, providing a firm framework to study mediated humorous entertainment.

2 Theories of Humor

What makes something funny? In other words, how can we account for the mechanisms that create mirth? Discussed here are key theoretical accounts of humor emerging from philosophical approaches to humor, which provide mutually complementary accounts of the phenomenon of humor and mirth. While these classical theories loom large in humor studies, derivative theories in contemporary literature promise a more precise explanation of humor.

2.1 Superiority Theory

The superiority theory of humor states that humor causes mirth by eliciting a sense of superiority over the misfortune of others. According to this theory, humor is inherently derisive, in that the degree of derision may vary but there is always present an object, tangible or intangible, which is the subject of derision (Koestler, 1964). This outlook on the nature of humor is consistent with the ‘theory of degradation’ posited by Aristotle, while the more modern versions of this theory find their roots in the pessimistic outlooks of Thomas Hobbes who described laughter as “sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (Hobbes, 1651, p. 27). Hobbes’s outlook on humor as social comparison was shared by nineteenth-century philosophers like Georg W. F. Hegel and Alexander Bain (Ruch, 2008). On similar lines, philosopher

Henry Bergson called humor a “social corrective” which was “intended to humiliate” (Bergson, 1899, p. 60).

Alternative theories of humor were later proposed in philosophical resistance to the anti-social notion of humor espoused by the superiority theory. Hutcheson (1750) argued that a comparison with the self is neither necessary nor a sufficient condition for laughter. Zillmann (2000, p. 44) critiqued that Hobbes’s social comparison reasoning “projects enjoyment in general terms, not amusement, merriment, and gaiety specifically.” To respond to these shortcomings of the superiority theory, two major theories gained popularity in the 18th century—relief theory and incongruity theory—which addressed the affective and cognitive phenomenon of humor and laughter, without implicating humor as anti-social (Morreall, 2009).

2.2 Relief Theory

The relief theory states that humor relieves emotional tension, producing the feeling of pleasure and mirth. Shaftesbury (1999) first introduced the concept of emotional relief in humor, which was based on a hydraulic understanding of the nervous system—nerves were thought to carry fluid-like “animal spirits” which sometimes built up pressure that called for release. Shaftesbury’s notions about relief theory were then revised by Spencer (1875) and Freud (1971). According to Freud, laughter is a release of some “psychic energy,” like the energy of repressed feelings (joking), thinking (comic), feeling emotions (humor). These releases through laughter are “saving” energy that would otherwise be spent in repressing feelings, thinking, or feeling a variety of other emotions. Despite its many flaws and problematic roots in the outdated hydraulic theory of the nervous system, the relief theory offers a critical physiological account of humor, and acknowledges the role of mind and body in engaging with humor. The emotional account is well presented in the oft-quoted description of laughter by Kant (1987, p. 203): “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation being reduced to nothing.”

2.3 Incongruity Theory

While Hobbes erroneously concluded that social comparison is a necessary motivator for laughter, the act of comparison (social or not) might be germane to the processing of humor. The incongruity theory posits that laughter or mirth is caused by the perception and recognition of incongruity, or a violation of expectations. Now a dominant theory of humor in psychological and linguistic literature, the genealogy of incongruity theory roots back to philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant, and James Beattie. The formulation for incongruity theory by Schopenhauer (2018, p. 91) is frequently quoted: “the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the

sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it, thus between the abstract and the concrete object of perception.”

Despite its dominance among psychology and social science scholars, and it being considered closest to a general theory of humor (Watson, 2015), the incongruity theory is not without its share of criticisms. The definitions offered for “humorous incongruities” have been imprecise, covering a set of loosely synonymous terms like discrepancy, inconsistency, absurdity, and so on, with no clear account of what separates non-humorous incongruities from humorous ones (Morreall, 2009). To counter, some scholars even consider this ambiguity a strength of the theory, as it allows for anything to be considered incongruous, and thus, laughable (Shaw, 2010). A more significant critique of the incongruity theory is of its assertion that incongruity is necessarily amusing. Shultz (1972) addressed this shortcoming by proposing *incongruity-resolution*, wherein mirth results from reinterpreting and logically resolving the incongruity set up in the humorous stimulus or event. Suls (1972) proposed a similar and the more popular incongruity-resolution model, referred to as the *two-stage model of humor appreciation*, wherein humor is processed in two consecutive stages: (1) incongruity recognition, and (2) resolution of the recognized incongruity. Here, the element of “surprise” is an import distinction from Shultz’s theory—according to Suls, mirth results from the resolution of an unexpected or surprising incongruity. Ruch and Hehl (1998) further refined this theory by suggesting an additional third stage in which there is a realization that the resolution does not make sense.

3 Contemporary Theories of Humor

Morreall (2009, p. 26) critically reviewed the “big three” classical theories of superiority, relief, and incongruity, and surmised that these theories “provide some insights into humor,” however “none adequately explains the nature of humor, and the whole tradition of philosophy of humor hardly acknowledges, much less explains, the value of humor.” Indeed, these broad theories fall short of providing precise and testable research theories which would address research questions related to the humor experience (Martin & Ford, 2018c). Martin and Ford (2018c, p. 72) identified three dominant contemporary theories of humor which address these shortcomings: (1) Reversal Theory, (2) Comprehension-Elaboration Theory, and (3) Benign Violation Theory. These theories specifically expand upon the incongruity-resolution theory, by integrating multiple cognitive and motivational explanatory mechanisms ignored by the simplistic classical theories. Importantly, these theories explain the experience of humor by specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of mirth and laughter (Wyer & Collins, 1992).

3.1 Reversal Theory

According to the reversal theory of humor proposed by Apter (1991), for a person to perceive a stimulus or event as humorous depends on three conditions: the person must be in a (1) humor mindset, (2) experiencing heightened arousal, and (3) engaging in *cognitive synergy* and *diminishment*. Here, the “humor mindset” is defined as the *paratelic* motivational state, where one is feeling spontaneous and playful, focused on the present, and seeking fun and excitement (Apter, 1991, 2001). The reversal theory deviates from the incongruity-resolution models by arguing that the reinterpretation of incongruity does not resolve the incongruity, rather it creates *cognitive synergy*, followed by a *diminishment* of the stimulus by making us see the stimuli as less important or valuable. In Apter’s description, cognitive synergy is similar to Koestler’s (1964) concept of “bisociation”—it is the simultaneous activation of two contradictory interpretations of a stimulus. Despite the added specificity of the incongruity-resolution process necessary for mirth, it does not account for the effect of difficulty of comprehending an event on humor elicitation (Wyer & Collins, 1992).

3.2 Comprehension-Elaboration Theory

The comprehension-elaboration theory of humor developed by Wyer and Collins (1992) offers *comprehension* as a more precise term to capture the cognitive mechanisms involved in the interpretation and subsequent reinterpretation of stimulus. More importantly, they posit that comprehension is followed by an additional cognitive process of *elaboration*, defined as the initial interpretation of a stimulus or event. The comprehension-elaboration theory is based on the concept of “mental schemas,” the dynamic mental representation of classes of stimuli used to organize knowledge and expectations about them (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). According to this model, new schemas are identified and activated to reinterpret incongruous stimuli or events. Following the development of new schema as a result of reinterpretation, the amount of mirth experienced then depends on (1) the degree of diminishment of the stimulus or event (similar to reversal theory), (2) amount of elaboration in response to the new schema, and (3) difficulty to comprehend the stimulus or event.

3.3 Benign Violation Theory

The benign violation theory proposed by McGraw and Warren (2010) frames incongruity as a “violation,” departing with Koestler’s (1964) “bisociation” framing of incongruity as a juxtaposition of two contradictory “frames of reference,” or Suls’s (1972) framing of incongruity as a surprise. In making this distinction, the benign violations theory provides a more general account of humor by explaining mirth derived from humorous

stimuli or events other than jokes containing resolvable incongruity. Further, the concept of “violation” is a more precise concept than “incongruity,” and allows this theory to distinguish more accurately the humorous from the non-humorous. Here, violation refers to anything that threatens one’s personal physical safety or dignity, or one’s understanding of social, moral, or linguistic norms. According to this theory, mirth is experienced when one simultaneously interprets a stimulus or event (1) as a *violation*, and (2) as *benign*, or harmless.

4 Disciplinary Approaches to the Study of Humor and Mirth

The classical and contemporary theories of humor and mirth reviewed here provide a reasonably comprehensive framework within which mediated humorous entertainment can be studied. Each of these theories and their derivatives evidently explain complementary and overlapping aspects of the relationship between humor and mirth. While superiority theory helps us understand the sociopsychological motivations for mirth, relief theory provides an account for the pleasure felt in mirth, and incongruity theory draws cognitive and linguistic explanations for what might be considered humorous (Watson, 2015). We now review the different disciplinary approaches in humor studies, and how different disciplines have paid preferential attention to some classical theories over the others.

4.1 Psychology

Psychological inquiries of humor have focused on **its effect in laughter**, its underlying mental processes, and the resulting mirth, as evident in the following definition of humor by psychologists Martin and Ford (2018a, p. 3):

a broad, multifaceted term that represents anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it.

Psychological interest in humor has spanned several sub-disciplines, including cognitive, personality, developmental, social, physiological, clinical, health, educational, and organizational, across which cognitive psychology has paid significant attention to humor. Cognitive psychological inquiry of humor primarily concerns itself with the mental processes involved in understanding jokes (*humor perception*) and is one of the most influential sub-disciplines of humor studies in psychology (Martin & Ford, 2018e). Attesting to its influence, the popular incongruity theories of humor and their

contemporary derivatives are based on principles derived from cognitive psychology. Other approaches connected to cognitive psychology of humor include approaches by psycholinguists (Giora, 1985, 1995; Giora et al., 2005), neuroscientists (Bartolo et al., 2006; Goel & Dolan, 2001; Kennison, 2020; Uekermann et al., 2007), and computational scientists (Hempelmann & Attardo, 2011; Hempelmann & Petrenko, 2015; D. Ritchie, 2005; G. Ritchie, 2001). In addition to *humor perception*, perhaps equivalently relevant to the study of mediated humorous entertainment is the cognitive psychology of *humor production*, which positions humor as a cognitive ability. A relatively small body of research on humor production has shown that an individual’s ability to create humor is strongly correlated with their levels of creativity (Ruch & Heintz, 2019) and intelligence (Greengross et al., 2012; Greengross & Miller, 2011).

Connectedly, personality psychological research has focused on the individual differences in “sense of humor”—having the ability or capacity to perceive, appreciate, or create humor (Martin & Ford, 2018d). Ruch and colleagues analyzed multiple measurement scales for sense of humor to converge on a set of three underlying dimensions: humor appreciation, cheerful temperament (related to extraversion), and non-serious and playful disposition (Köhler & Ruch, 1996; Ruch, 1994b, 1994a). This line of study was further extended to introduce three individual differences in dispositions: *gelotophobia* (fear of being laughed at), *gelotophilia* (the joy of being laughed at), and *katagelasticism* (the joy of laughing at others) (Ruch & Proyer, 2009).

In contrast to the individual specific approaches of cognitive and personality psychology, social psychologists have studied humor in social contexts, at both micro-levels (individual attitudes and social perceptions), and macro-levels (group processes, interpersonal and intergroup relations) of analysis (Martin & Ford, 2018f; Strick & Ford, 2021). Each level of analysis is predicated on the inherent polysemy of humor, which can introduce ambiguity to the meaning and interpretation of humorous communications (Attardo, 1993). This ambiguity can serve both positive (adaptive) and negative (maladaptive) social functions, or in other words, lead to either “lubricant” or “abrasive” effects in interpersonal settings (Martineau, 1972).

Traditionally, psychological inquiries of humor have largely been limited to the study of jokes, or “short, amusing stories ending in a punch line” (Martin & Ford, 2018b, p. 20). Other forms of humor in daily life of relevance to psychological research include spontaneous conversational humor, unintentional humor, and performance humor, which is perhaps most relevant to mediated humor studies (Martin & Ford, 2018b). Performance humor spans mediated forms of humor like television sit-coms and staged performances, across a range of interoperative contemporary communication infrastructures like print, television, radio, film, internet, etc. Concurrently, performance humor has received little attention in psychology. Despite this gap in research, the psychological tradition of humor studies contributes significant insights to the phenomenological understanding of humor which can be applied to mediated entertainment contexts.

4.2 Linguistics

The most influential linguistic inquiries of humor, by the likes of Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, have focused on a semantic approach to study verbal or textual humor, i.e., they have examined how certain texts are interpreted as humorous (Attardo, 2020). Within this line of inquiry, puns emerged as a legitimate and primarily taxonomical field of analysis (Attardo, 2008). Attardo (1994) classified the taxonomies of puns into four types: based on linguistic phenomenon (e.g., homophily), based on linguistic categories (e.g., paradigmatic), based on surface structure (e.g., phonetic distance between words), and eclectic (mixed criteria).

Given the lack of theoretical specificity, alternatives to the taxonomical model were proposed. Perhaps the most significant and radical alternative was offered by Victor Raskin in his Semantic-Script Theory of Humor (SSTH; Raskin, 1985), which makes two claims about jokes: (1) each joke text is interpretable according to at least two distinct scripts (or frames of reference), and (2) that the scripts are opposed to each other. While focusing on scripts, SSTH does not account for other levels of linguistics, like social and narratological issues (Attardo, 2008). Revising and extending the SSTH to generalize across more linguistic levels, Raskin and Attardo developed the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), which proposes a total of six “knowledge resources” to explain humor: five knowledge resources in addition to Script Opposition presented in SSTH (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). These five additional knowledge resources are: Logical Mechanism (corresponding to the resolution phase in incongruity-resolution theory); Situation (refers to situational and contextual information evoked by the scripts); Target (refers to the derogatory target of the joke); Narrative Strategy (the genre or format of the joke); Language (linguistic choices made in the joke). Like SSTH, GTVH almost exclusively focused on jokes, until it was later expanded to incorporate analyses of longer texts (Attardo, 2010). SSTH and GTVH have been dominant in linguistic explorations of humor, including connected sub-disciplines like neurolinguistics (Chen et al., 2017).

Despite its expanded scope, GTVH focuses mostly on the semantic or pragmatic content of humorous texts, which exclusively emphasize the intended humorous interpretations of the producer of humor. More broadly, SSTH and GTVH do not account for the *performative* aspects of humor, including the inherent polysemy of humor (the same humorous text can be interpreted differently by different people), and the socio-contextual cues present in verbal humor (e.g., intonation, gestures, relationship between communicators) (Canestrari, 2010; Tsakona, 2017b, 2020). To address these shortcomings, contemporary linguistic theories of humor have proposed an extension of GTVH by adding two more knowledge resources: *meta-knowledge resource*, which refers to speaker’s signals about being humorous or non-humorous (Canestrari, 2010), and *context resource*, which refers to the sociocultural context of the humorous text (Tsakona, 2017b).

In disagreement with the extensions proposed to GTVH, Attardo (2017) argued that GTVH must be considered a theory of *competence*, and that a separate theory of

performance of humor should be developed. In a recent linguistic theoretical development, Villy Tsakona (2020) proposed the *Discourse Theory of Humor* (DTH), which could be deployed to analyze humor performance. In the view of Tsakona (2020), context is already taken into account in the knowledge resources enlisted in GTVH, and DTH rearranges those knowledge resources into three analytical foci which account for humor performance: (1) *sociocultural assumptions*, which refers to background knowledge necessary to process humor, (2) *genre*, which refers to the communicative format or genre within which humor is being performed, and (3) *text*, which refers to the semantic elements and stylistic choices in the performed humor. Importantly, DTH views humorous discourse as “a dynamic, jointly negotiated activity where participants draw from several aspects of context to create and interpret humor” (Tsakona, 2020, p. 138) This presupposition emphasizes the interpretation offered by interlocutors of humor, and not producers of humor, which is particularly relevant to the study of mediated humor and its participatory aspects. The participatory nature of humor might take many forms, like commenting on or re-creating memes on online social media platforms. Audience participation, in this view, is an indispensable part of humor performance, and is key to building an analytical framework to study mediated humorous entertainment.

4.3 Sociology

Humor is fundamentally socially experienced, and thus fundamentally invites its sociological inquiry. Some sociologists even find a fundamental synergy between sociology and humor—according to Zijderfeld (1982), both sociology and humor play the role of “debunking” and challenging normalized social realities. Despite these obvious connections, sociologists have paid limited attention to the study of humor, with primary focus on the social functions of humor and how humor is socially shaped (Kuipers, 2008).

Functionalist approaches in sociological inquiries of humor focus on three broad social functions of humor: humor as social *relief*, humor as social *cohesion*, and humor as social *control*. The *relief* function of humor is consistent with the relief theory of humor, wherein humor and joking is viewed as a way to diffuse strain in interpersonal relationships (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). The social *cohesion* function of humor emphasizes humor’s role in forging interpersonal bonds (Coser, 1959). Lastly, the social *control* function of humor, consistent with Bergson’s (1899) interpretation of laughter as a social corrective, views humor as a way to maintain social order by ridiculing any transgressions to the social order. Relatedly, at odds with the social cohesion function, the *hierarchy building* function of humor has been studied, wherein humor is viewed as a means to reinforce individual social statuses (Coser, 1960). The well-studied function of humor as social control is accompanied by a contrasting view that humor also simultaneously functions as *social resistance*. Lynch (2002) address

this dualistic and paradoxical nature of humor by arguing for a communication emphasis in place of a functional emphasis in humor studies, which would “interpret each humor expression as it occurs within a social setting” (Lynch, 2002, p. 440). Beyond these classical sociological functions of humor, other functions have been studied, like meaning making and tension building (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001).

Alternative sociological approaches to humor include *conflict* approaches, *symbolic interactionist* approaches, and *phenomenological* approaches (Kuipers, 2008). Theories developed in the *conflict* approach view humor as an expression of conflict or antagonism, where humor is positioned as a weapon, or a form of attack and defense in social conflict (Speier, 1998). *Symbolic interactionist* approaches study the role of humor in the social construction of meaning. This approach is premised on the notion that social reality is interpersonally co-constructed and negotiated in social interactions (Hay, 2001). The *phenomenological* approach to humor views humor as a worldview, an individual-level trait which defines one’s perception of their social environment. The humorous worldview, according to phenomenological approaches, holds potential for social resistance and change (Zijderveld, 1982).

Several critical traditions of inquiry in humor have drawn from sociological approaches, perhaps the most prominent one being *feminist approaches* to humor. Like most sociological approaches, feminist approaches also depart from a dependence on incongruity theories and linguistic models, and instead focus on “broader relationships between social practices, gender, systematic oppression, embodiment, and social construction” (Marvin, 2022). The tension of control and resistance functions of humor are represented in this field of study in the form of *sexist* humor—the type of humor which affirms patriarchal norms of inferiority of women, and *subversive* and *feminist* humor—the type of humor which critiques said patriarchal notions. Shifman and Lemish (2011) identified three core aspects of feminist humor: (1) *oppositional*: criticizing hegemonic gender-based stereotyping, (2) *expression of empowerment*: freely expressing critical thoughts about gender inequalities, and (3) *staging*: appropriately platforming such expressions using various available media.

Like both psychology and linguistics, the bulk of the sociological inquiries of humor have focused on short texts or jokes, which arguably occupy a small percentage of mediated humor enjoyed in daily life (for an early review, see Martin & Kuiper 1999). The many mediated forms of humor have been largely understudied in sociology. Indeed, genres of mediated humor and the medium through which it is communicated have significant consequences for the interpretation of humor (Kuipers, 2008). The study of mediated humor will benefit from new sociological insights for different forms of humor, paying attention to the interaction between humor reception, genres, and the modality of mediation.

5 Summary and Provocations

Humor and mirth are complicated phenomena, theorizing which has been an elusive goal for many disciplines. Despite being ever present in the contemporary mediated entertainment landscape, we know little about how humor is created, disseminated, and consumed. As outlined in this chapter, the theories of superiority and relief, and the many theories of incongruity, all explain overlapping yet complementary aspects of the experience of humor and mirth. The dominant approaches to humor in psychology, linguistics, and sociology, have all contributed to our understanding of the necessary conditions for humor, why we perceive things to be humorous, and the role of humor in social cohesion and conflict. Inquiries on humor and mirth in mediated entertainment can draw from these multi-disciplinary insights on humor and mirth towards the unique demands of this nascent field. Specifically, I provoke scholars of mediated humor to consider the demands and context of contemporary digital infrastructures, as well as be mindful of key critiques within humor studies.

5.1 Humor in the Digital Era

Crucial to understanding humor in digital media are three key elements of group-driven humor enlisted by Weitz (2017): *remediation*, *modularity*, and *variability*. *Remediation* refers to the refashioning of old-style humor to the new digital media environments (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). *Modularity* refers to the modular nature of the various elements into which digital items like texts, images, and videos can be broke down. *Variability* refers to the variety of reuse and reconfigurations of digital items to construct a variety of humorous meanings. Perhaps the most prominent example of humor in digital media with these three elements is the *internet meme*—a socially constructed set of digital items which share common characteristics (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Shifman, 2013). Scholars of mediated humor should pay attention to how the key elements enlisted by Weitz (2017) inform engagement with memes and other emerging digital genres of humor.

5.2 Humor and Gender

Humor can be used as a tool for constructing gender identity, and the dominant forms of humor used by (cis) men have positioned them as powerful or dominant, at the expense of women and other gender identities (Crawford, 2003; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). The masculinist notions of dominance are also reflected in key theoretical developments in humor studies, prominently in the superiority theory and theories of humor as social control. Such patriarchal norms and biases prevalent in contemporary humor have been critiqued by feminist approaches to humor, men-

tioned earlier in the chapter (Baccolini & Chiaro, 2014a). Building on these feminist approaches, it is imperative for scholars to consider the role of gender in contemporary mediated humor, and probe the tensions between masculinist domination and feminist resistance in humor without reducing gender to a male-female binary (Baccolini & Chiaro, 2014b).

5.3 Perspectives from the Global South

The dominance of Global North perspectives in humor and popular culture research has led to hegemonic understanding of the importance of Western humor. Even recent literature in global perspectives on humor continues to center theoretical developments from the Global North, often using regions and people in the Global South “as sites of data production and collection by Western scholars” (Mpofu, 2021). Research on humor in the contemporary media environment must respond to recent and long overdue calls for making the field of communication, media, and entertainment research more globally collaborative and pluralistic (Kraidy, 2018). This move would require a critical shift in theoretical and empirical research on humor, including but not limited to a review of alternative genealogies of humor theories from the Global South.

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