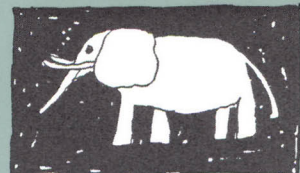
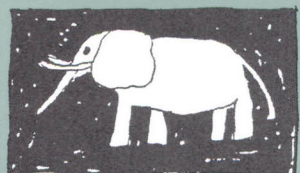
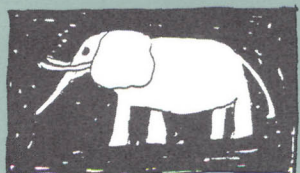
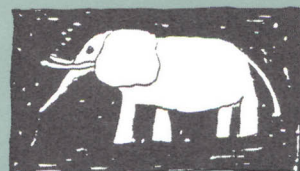


Blind
Men
and
Elephants

Perspectives on Humor



Arthur
Asa
Berger

**Blind Men
and
Elephants**



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Perspectives on Humor

Arthur Asa Berger

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A joke is a play on form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first. I confess that I find Freud's definition of the joke highly satisfactory. The joke is an image of the relaxation of conscious control in favour of the subconscious.

—Mary Douglas
“Jokes”



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Preface

Writing one book on humor can be looked upon, by those who have a charitable disposition, as a youthful (or, in my case, not so youthful) indiscretion. But what does one make of someone who writes two books on humor? In an earlier book, *An Anatomy of Humor*, I dealt with a typology I'd developed—some forty-five techniques that, I suggested, are at the heart of humor. I explained the techniques and then applied them to a variety of examples—everything from jokes to *Twelfth Night* to *Huckleberry Finn* and Jewish humor.

In this book I do something else. I provide a number of what might be called “case histories” that deal with the way scholars from a variety of different disciplines and scholarly domains try to make sense of humor. I've also used jokes and humorous texts not found in my first book, though I must confess there are, perhaps, a couple of jokes that I borrowed from *An Anatomy of Humor* in this book. Finding good jokes that can be used for scholarly concerns is not the easiest thing to do, believe me.

One of the chapters in this book is co-authored. I started writing an article on humor with Aaron Wildavsky using his work on political cultures and had roughed in the article when he suddenly took sick and, after only a few months, died of lung cancer. Before he became ill I sent him a draft and he made a considerable number of comments and suggestions; he also supplied some jokes. We spent some time talking about the article on the phone, as well. So the article represents, to some extent, a collaboration. But he never saw the final draft. We had talked, from time to time, of writing a book together on humor and this article was, in a sense, a start on that project.

Some scholarly work on humor makes a point of not being funny; there are, after all, scholars who use humor as some kind of a variable but are really interested in other things. This book doesn't follow that pattern; I've included a large number of jokes (because they are short

and relatively easy to deal with) and other humorous texts. An unfunny book on humor strikes me as somewhat of an oxymoron.

Since this book has elephants in the title, let me conclude with an elephant joke—or, more precisely, an elephant riddle:

What did the elephant say to the naked man?

How do you get enough to eat with that?

If you found that riddle amusing and are curious about why it amused you, and want to know “what’s so funny about that?”—read on.

Because of the all-pervading scope and extremely diverse nature of humor, it can be studied by scholars from many disciplines, from the humanities to the natural sciences. The history of humor research demonstrates that such indeed has been the case; philosophers, literary critics, literary biographers and historians, sociologists, folklorists, psychologists, physicians, and scholars from various other disciplines have studied humor since antiquity.

Humor scholars are like blind men who need to view their work within the total context of the field of humorology while simultaneously describing and discussing with their colleagues in the field what they discover in order to come to some consensus as to what this elephant of humor is like. They could also learn to look at the subject from disciplinary perspectives other than their own.

—M.L. Apte
“Disciplinary Boundaries
in Humorology: An
Anthropologist’s Ruminations”



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Mirrors on Mirth: Making Sense of Humor

This book is about the different ways people from a variety of fields and disciplines try to make sense of humor. *Blind Men and Elephants* is not meant to be a humorous book, per se, though it does have a good deal of humor in it and I believe you will find it, in many places, amusing and entertaining. I think humorless books about humor are a bad idea; some would say, of course, that all books about humor are a bad idea.

But humor is too important a subject to be ignored and has become, in recent years, a subject of great interest in academic circles and elsewhere. There is an international academic journal, *Humor*, devoted to the subject; there are yearly conferences on humor sponsored by the International Society for Humor Studies; other organizations, all over the world, hold conferences on humor; and there are even several book clubs devoted solely to books on humor.

Nevertheless, humor continues to confound us. We've never figured out how to deal with it. Thus, in an influential book, *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, editors Tony Chapman and Hugh Foot (1976,4) write:

No all embracing theory of humour and/or laughter has yet gained widespread acceptance and possibly no general theory will ever be successfully applied to the human race as a whole when its members exhibit such vast individual differences with respect to their humour responsiveness. The paradox associated with humour is almost certainly a function of its being incorrectly viewed as a unitary process. Humor plays a myriad of roles and serves a number of quite different functions.

It is this complexity that Chapman and Foot mention that led me to adopt the approach I have taken, using a variety of different case histories to shed different perspectives on humor.

A complex phenomenon like humor demands, I would suggest, a multidisciplinary approach, and that is the methodology I have used.

The case histories reflect the positions of scholars from a number of different areas and disciplines, but the scholarly positions taken reflect only one of many possible approaches that could be taken within a given discipline, since disciplines (as well as multidisciplinary departments) are not unitary and are not made up of likeminded people.

The Problem of Reading Humorous Texts

Let me return to Chapman and Foot's comment about the variety of responses members of the human race give to humor. This matter of human variability is at the heart of the reader-response school of literary theory.

The development of reader-response theory raises an interesting question about humor. If everyone "reads" (sees, interprets, makes sense of) literary works, films, television shows, and so forth his or her own way, so to speak, why is it that audiences tend to respond with laughter, more or less at the same time, to jokes told by stand-up comedians or humorous parts of films?

Wolfgang Iser, one of the leading reader-response or reception theorists, argues that one can make a distinction between a literary work (and in the case of humor we can add a subliterary work, such as a joke, comic strip, animated film, cartoon, etc.) and the experience a reader has in reading the work. As he writes in his essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" (Lodge, 1988, 212):

The texts as such offer different "schematized views" through which the subject matter of the work can come to light, but the actual bringing to light is an action of *Konkretisation*. If this is so, then the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader.

We have, then, with literary texts (and other kinds of texts as well) two poles: the artistic and the aesthetic. The artistic is created by the author and the aesthetic is realized by the reader. When readers read a text, they bring what Iser calls a "literary work" into existence, and it is neither the text nor the reading, but something, a state that Iser calls "virtuality," in between.

From this point of view, the intentions of the author of a text are not of the utmost significance, for different readers, based on their individual dispositions, get different things out of a given text. The author creates the text but it is nothing without a reader and the reader, by reading, helps bring into being the literary work. As Iser puts it, “The phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text” (Lodge, 1988, 212). The old idea of privileging the text and assuming that all readers will have the same responses and get the same ideas (very similar to the hypodermic needle theory of communication) is rejected.

People differ greatly in terms of their education, socioeconomic level, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, politics, and so on. Is it any surprise that given these differences (and the passions that they seem to engender in individuals nowadays) that we should suggest that readers get different things out of what they read and interpret the texts they read in a variety of ways?

I would like to suggest that we use the term *reading* broadly, and use it to deal with our experiences with all kinds of works—not only literary ones (by which is meant “elite” works of literature) but nonliterary, or what we used to describe as subliterary, ones. For our purposes, when we talk about texts, we will not limit ourselves to the great works of literary humor by Shakespeare, Molière, Gogol, or Mark Twain, but also include, in our understanding of what texts are, jokes, comic strips, cartoons, graffiti, sitcoms, comic plays and films, and so on.

Let us return now to the problem (mentioned earlier) that arises with humorous texts, such as jokes and humorous films: at some times audiences, made up of readers, listeners, or viewers who all read texts differently, so the reader-response theorists tell us, often respond, at the same time, with laughter. How might one explain this?

One answer is that humorous texts are what Umberto Eco calls “open texts.” He distinguishes between “closed texts,” which are open, more or less, to any interpretation, and “open texts,” which allegedly have the capacity to force readers to use texts in prescribed ways. Eco points out in his introduction to *The Role of the Reader* (1984, 8) that people come from a variety of different backgrounds, which affects the way they decode (make sense of) texts:

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In the process of communication, a text is frequently interpreted against the background of codes different from those intended by the author. Some authors do not take into account such a possibility. They have in mind an average addressee referred to a given social context. Nobody can say what happens when the actual reader is different from the “average” one.

Eco (1984, 8) then distinguishes between two kinds of texts—open and closed ones—and writes:

Those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of to more or less precise empirical readers (be they children, soap-opera addicts, doctors, law-abiding citizens, swingers, Presbyterians, farmers, middle-class women, scuba divers, effete snobs, or any other imaginable sociopsychological category) are in fact open to any possible aberrant decoding. A text so immoderately ‘open’ to every possible interpretation will be called a *closed* one.

He suggests that Superman comic strips and Ian Fleming’s novels about James Bond belong to this category.

Eco then describes another kind of text, *open* texts, which, he suggests, is quite different from closed ones. *Open* texts don’t allow readers to decode the texts any way they want to. As Eco (1984, 9) writes: “You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however ‘open’ it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation.” If Eco is correct, and there are texts that are actually *open*, humorous texts might be good examples of this category. After all, these texts try to create the kind of model readers they want—people who will respond with smiles, laughter, and related feelings to a text.

But the notion of open readers also suggests that reader-response theorists oversimplify things and do not recognize that in certain situations, readers do not have any latitude, so to speak, about how they will make sense of a text. There is another possibility that would fit within reader-response theory, namely, that although different readers get many different things out of a text, based on their backgrounds, there are, nevertheless, certain commonalities in what they get, generated by the text, that, in the case of humorous works, enable them to respond by laughter, as long as the subject of the joke or humor does not deal with matters and subjects about which the various individuals have very strong beliefs and feelings.

There is also, of course, the matter of arousal and contagion and it may be that a few people (the equivalent of humor opinion leaders) laughing in an audience will induce many others to laugh, even though they may not

think they've seen or heard anything terribly funny. People go to see stand-up comics and comedies (films and plays) because they want to laugh and be amused, so they are predisposed to find things humorous.

We might keep this matter of why people who allegedly interpret works differently laugh at the same time in the back of our heads as we pursue our investigation of how different disciplines, metadisciplines, and methodologies make sense of humor. Although it is not generally thought of as pertaining to the question of reader-response or reception theory, John Godfrey Saxe's poem about some blind men from Hindustan and an elephant is relevant and can be thought of as a good example of what reception theorists have in mind when they talk about how different people make sense of a given work.

The Blind Men of Hindustan and the Rashomon Phenomenon

Let me quote John Godfrey Saxe's famous poem "The Blind Men and the Elephant." This poem shows that people see (or in this case experience) things in different ways—elephants and, as I have suggested, jokes and other forms of humor—a matter that is also at the heart of Kurosawa's marvelous film *Rashomon*.

THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined.
Who went to see the Elephant
(Tho' all of them were blind)
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! But the elephant
Is very like a wall."*

*The second feeling of the tusk,
Cried "How, what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
to me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an elephant
Is very like a spear."*

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*The third approached the animal
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a snake."*

*The fourth reached out an eager hand
and felt about the knee.
"What most of this wondrous beast is like
Is might plain," quoth he.
"T'is clear enough the elephant
Is very like a tree."*

*The fifth chanced to touch the ear
Said "E'en the blindest man
can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an elephant
Is very like a fan."*

*The sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope
That seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a rope."*

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong.*

The Rashomon Phenomenon

What we have here is a phenomenon sometimes known as the *Rashomon* phenomenon, after the brilliant film that shows a bandit having sex with a woman in front of her husband (who is tied up and helpless) and who, later on, is found dead. The film then offers completely different perspectives on what happened from the points of view of four "readers": the bandit, the dead husband (who communicates via a psychic), the wife, and a wood gatherer who accidentally stumbled upon the scene and observed things.