

Attardo, Salvatore (Ed.) (2014). Encyclopedia of humor studies. (Vols. 1-2). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

GIOVANNANTONIO FORABOSCO*

Centro Ricerca Umoreismo, CRU

Book review

Received 6 June 2015; accepted 27 October 2015

ABSTRACT

EN The concept of the encyclopedia is well suited for this impressive publication. In an extended, yet detailed form, this project brings together a significant number of research findings on humor, beginning with contemporary work that inserts itself into an important, largely philosophical, tradition of studies and theories. Many researchers and scholars have focused on defining the plethora of voices contained in these two volumes, totaling more than 900 pages. Even if a certain quantity of material and some interesting perspectives have not been included, there is no doubt that the breadth of representation, significance of the research, and value of this collection represent a stimulus for future studies with an interest in sense of humor.

Key words: HUMOR, ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HUMOR STUDIES

ES El concepto de enciclopedia se adapta bien a esta publicación imponente. Recoge de una forma amplia y, al tiempo, detallada, buena parte de los conocimientos que se han producido sobre el humorismo, empezando por la investigación contemporánea que se inserta en una importante tradición, filosófica sobre todo, de estudios y teorías. Numerosos investigadores y estudiosos se han centrado en definir los muchos lemas contenidos en los dos volúmenes de más de novecientas páginas. A pesar de que por el límite que impone cada empresa humana, cierta cantidad de material y algunas perspectivas, seguramente interesantes, no han sido incluidas en la obra, no cabe duda de que tanto el grado de representatividad como el de significatividad del contenido, así como su valor de documentación, representan un estímulo para futuras profundizaciones en las muchas disciplinas que se ocupan del sentido del humor.

Palabras clave: HUMOR, ENCICLOPEDIA DE ESTUDIOS DEL HUMOR

IT Il concetto di enciclopedia si adatta bene a questa imponente pubblicazione. Raccoglie, in forma estesa e approfondita, gran parte delle conoscenze prodotte sul comico dalla ricerca contemporanea che si innesta su una importante tradizione, soprattutto filosofica, di studi e teorie. Un gran numero di studiosi e ricercatori sono stati impegnati a definire le molte voci contenute nei due volumi di oltre novecento pagine. Anche se, limite di ogni umana impresa, una certa quantità di materiale e alcune prospettive anche interessanti non sono state comprese, è indubbio che è del tutto rilevante sia la rappresentatività e significatività del contenuto che il suo valore di documentazione e di stimolo per futuri approfondimenti nelle tante discipline che dello humor si occupano.

Parole chiave: COMICO, ENCICLOPEDIA DELLA RICERCA SUL COMICO

It is a general rule that a reviewer should be neutral and independent. This is not the case here. Not only am I a contributor to the encyclopedia having provided an entry, but I am also in a close, and even friendly, relationship with some of those who had a part in this editorial enterprise. On the other hand, it would not have been an easy task for the editors of the hosting journal to find someone completely uninvolved and still an experienced scholar or a researcher in the field of humor studies, as many if not most humor scholars are among the 212 authors of one or more entries of the *Encyclopedia*. Keeping this bias in

*Contact: g.forabosco@tin.it

mind, I will offer a description and an analysis of the main features of this imposing work of more than 900 pages in two volumes in the most objective way possible.

A preliminary question to be addressed is, "Why an encyclopedia"? An answer comes from the following consideration. Up until the 1970s, it may have been sufficient to read 10-15 books and some articles in order to have an adequate knowledge of the state of the art of humor studies. Freud, Bergson, and a few others were among the scholars who had written books on this topic. While many other philosophers and thinkers, including Plato, Hobbes, and Kant, had proposed their own observations on the matter of ridicule, laughter, comic, and so on—in fact, it may be easier to list who *did not* express his thought—most authors dedicated only a few pages, or even just a few lines, to this subject. From the beginning of the seventies, an explosion of studies and research took place. After the first decade of the 21st century, the corpus of studies on humor became extensive. One consequence was that either humor researchers narrowed their fields of competence to very restricted and limited areas, as it would have otherwise been practically impossible to have a general and complete view of what was produced and published on the topic of humor within their own disciplines, let alone within different disciplines. The situation resembled that which brought Diderot e D'Alambert to the illuminist project that he carried out in the seventeenth century, when science and culture had had an impressive growth, and it seemed necessary, yet still possible, to collect all, or most of, the existing knowledge in a series of volumes, which formed the *Encyclopædia (Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers)*.

The meaning and the function of these two volumes of the *Encyclopedia of humor studies* is that of collecting the existing knowledge in humor studies and of favoring the development of new studies.

Salvatore Attardo is not only the editor, but also a reason for the quality of the Encyclopedia. I had the opportunity to read a manuscript of his many years ago, *Morfologia della barzelletta* (1989). Since then many publications have followed and have had a significant impact on the whole field of humor studies. Among other things, his role as the editor of the "International Journal of Humor Research" also needs mentioning.

Another element suggesting the high quality of the contributions is that scholars and researchers have summarized in a limited number of pages the work of years, or even of decades. Many disciplines are represented, from psychology to linguistics, from archeology to sociology. (Geology is not; followers of *The Big Bang Theory*, quoted by Attardo in his introduction, know why.)

A functional and effective editorial choice has been that the language and the style of presentation address both the humor researcher and the general reader. The entries are written in an accessible, clear, and readable way, without technicalities, and yet they are adequately articulated, rigorous, and informative. Perhaps, one exception to the standard of clarity—and for a reason, given the discipline—is the entry on "Mathematics and humor", by Donald Casadonte. Casadonte always makes me feel humble and willing to learn more. Anyway, I do believe that one day I will also be able to understand the "modified Van der Pol oscillator equation," with hard work and some tutorial help.

Most of the 335 entries are to be expected, as they are relevant and clearly connected with humor and related phenomena. "Aphorism", "Bergson's theory of the comic", "Caricature", "Cognitive aspects", not to mention "Laughing", "Paradox", "Riddle", "Slapstick", etc. are in this list. Others are the result of a choice among possibilities and alternatives. This applies in particular when specific theories are included that might not have a universal support (I have my own opinions on one or two), but they still represent an interesting topic for a debate. Some entries are not expected, at least not by the average reader. This regards, for instance, some expressions that do not belong to the Euro-American culture and language. The inclusion of "Xiangsheng", or "Xiehouyu," may surprise some. However, reading this entry, which by the way is the very final one, one opens one's mind to the Chinese world and finds out that the word is a "common figure of speech in standard Chinese" (p. 813) and many dialects. The term is often translated into English as "a proverb with the second part suspended" (p. 813). We may welcome this widening of the horizon as the benign face of globalization.

The *Encyclopedia* is extremely well documented and informative. An impressive quantity of scientifically and culturally valuable material is included. It would not be fair to underline what is not included, as the field of humor studies so extensive and differentiated. Yet, at least three omissions need to be noted. Although the work of Stanley Hall is mentioned in the entry on "Tickling", the article he published with Arthur Allin in 1897 is not referred to in the Appendix A (the chronology of notable events and publications). This article is of great historical importance, being the first recorded empirical study on humor. It was a report and analysis of the daily occasions of laughter, and data were collected from more than 700 subjects.

In addition, Hall was the first president of the American Psychological Association and the founder of the American Journal of Psychology. Another omission is Lillian Martin (1905) who performed the first-ever systematic experiments on humor, defining and manipulating many relevant variables, such as the characteristics of the stimuli or the conditions of the subjects (for instance, to name a curious variable, looking at cartoons after drinking or not drinking coffee). One important outcome of her studies was the description of the two principles of “fun accumulation” and of “fun fatigue”: the first well known to comedians in terms of the “warming up” process, and the second which every conductor of “Laughter Yoga” is (or should be) aware of.

A book by another Martin, Rod, called *The Psychology of Humor. An Integrative Approach* (2007) is mentioned in Appendix A. While I completely agree with this reference, another book with partially the same title, *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical perspectives and empirical issues*, edited by Goldstein and McGhee (1972), should have been listed as well. In my view, this 1972 publication was the opening of a new and more scientifically founded wave of studies. In particular, the contributions were highly stimulating, and they promoted a new vision of research: No more wide, all-encompassing, “theoretical” statements or formulae, but models or mini-theories dealing with more focused aspects or dimensions of humor, that explained, so to say, less but better. To mention just one example, the model proposed by Suls (1972) on the two-stage information processing of jokes (the core of the incongruity resolution model) had a great influence.

Last, but certainly the opposite of least, a word about William Fry Jr. and his “Foreword.” Paul McGhee once said, about studying humor, “I had found a subject that could engage my attention for a lifetime” (1979, p. vii). That is the story of Bill Fry. A pioneer of humor research, he founded the Institute of Gelotology in San Francisco in the early 1960s. He passed away at the age of 90 in 2014, after having enriched humor studies with many and valuable publications, from *Sweet Madness* (1963) to the foreword of the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*. In the last conference in which I had the opportunity to meet him, after my presentation he told me: “You made a good point.” A gold medal would not have made me more proud.

Definitely, the present reviewer is neither neutral nor independent.

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Giovannantonio Forabosco, Centro Ricerca Umoreismo - CRUg.forabosco@tin.it

- EN** | **Giovannantonio Forabosco**, psychologist and psychotherapist, is a member of the International Society for Humor Studies. He has published various articles about humor in different magazines such as *Le Scienze*, *Psicología contemporánea*, *Kos*, and the *International Journal of Humor Research*. His books include the recent publications *Il settimo senso. Psicología del senso dell'umorismo*, published by Orme, Rome, 2013 and *Caricature. I ritratti umoristici di Francesco Verlicchi*, Edizioni03, Verona, 2016. He directs the Center for Research on Humor Studies (Centro Ricerca Umoreismo, CRU, www.ricercaumorismo.it).
- ES** | **Giovannantonio Forabosco**, psicólogo psicoterapeuta, pertenece a la International Society for Humor Studies. Ha publicado varios artículos sobre el humorismo en diferentes revistas como *Le Scienze*, *Psicología Contemporanea*, *Kos*, *International Journal of Humor Research*. Entre sus libros, *Il settimo senso. Psicología del senso dell'umorismo*, editado por Orme, Roma, 2013 y *Caricature. I ritratti umoristici di Francesco Verlicchi*, Edizioni03, Verona, 2016. Dirige el CRU, Centro de Investigación sobre el Humorismo, www.ricercaumorismo.it
- IT** | **Giovannantonio Forabosco**, psicologo psicoterapeuta, è componente dell'International Society for Humor Studies. Ha pubblicato diversi articoli sull'umorismo in varie riviste quali *Le Scienze*, *Psicologia Contemporanea*, *Kos*, *International Journal of Humor Research*. Tra i suoi libri recenti, *Il settimo senso. Psicología del senso dell'umorismo*, Orme, Roma, 2013 e *Caricature. I ritratti umoristici di Francesco Verlicchi*, Edizioni03, Verona, 2016. Dirige il CRU – Centro Ricerca Umoreismo, www.ricercaumorismo.it