

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Crisis and Humorous Stories: Laughing at the Times of COVID-19

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If you get an email that says, “Find out what everyone is talking about in 2020,” don’t open it. It’s a virus. (Mad Comedy 2020)

Humour is commonly associated with enjoyment, which, partly mistakenly, is considered to be an antidote to seriousness (Ridanpää 2014a). However, humour has several social, political, cultural and economic functions which in most cases are not acknowledged, due to its common associations with buoyancy, innocent amusement and entertainment. Various narrative forms of humour are almost always socially, culturally and geographically conditional, transforming alongside local and global socio-political changes (Davies 1990; Ridanpää 2014b). The concept of crisis refers to multiple forms of ruptures, events, during which the normal rhythm of (social, political, economic, psychological, everyday) life is halted. As a result the concept of crisis entails a certain sense of seriousness, or to be more precise, seriousness is an elementary aspect of what crises mean in practice. This said, there can easily be found several convergences of crisis and humour, but do we need or want to scrutinize these convergences, getting behind the logic and semiotic structures through which serious events change into something which might prompt laughter?

As a matter of decorum, there are certain socially restricted and culturally dependent boundaries beyond which humorous stories are conventionally not permitted to extend (see Palmer 2005). Like jokes about school shootings, so-called Auschwitz jokes, also termed sick folklore, for example, have remained a taboo topic within ‘Western cultures’ (Dundes 1987a). In a similar vein, AIDS jokes have been called ‘sick humour’ (Dundes 1987b). The label ‘sick

humour' is also attached to disaster jokes, based on 'an incongruity between the gruesome and the innocuous' (Kuipers 2005: 71). The basic mechanism in disaster jokes is that 'the disaster is linked in a humorous way with a topic that is felt to be incompatible with such a serious event' (71). However, it is actually relatively usual that the crisis events are perceived as containing certain ironic nuances. Self-irony, placing oneself as the target of a joke, has often been considered a productive strategy in the context of various forms of crisis situations. As Steve Lipman's book *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (1991) illustrated, even Holocaust survivors are able to tell humorous jokes and anecdotes about their tragic past. In Israel, for instance, such humour turned into a genre with which to deal with memories of the Holocaust (Zandberg 2006).

According to Sigmund Freud (1905/2002), humour contains an internal psychological means for breaking taboos, and thus a certain relieving quality, a contestation of the 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about the world (Dodds and Kirby 2013). The benefit of using humour during an event of crisis is often associated with its levity and relieving effects (Liu and Fraustino 2014). This viewpoint relying on Freud's theory highlights the therapeutic force of humour, the way in which 'humour can be utilized to break a client's resistance, reduce tension, generate catharsis, and increase trust in the client/therapist relationship' (Dziegielewski 2003: 74). In crisis situations gallows humour and dark humour work as cognitive and behavioral coping strategies in reaction to stressful events (Maxwell 2003), techniques neutralizing emotionally charged areas, providing hope in multiple ways, happening at various spatial scales simultaneously (Ridanpää 2019). Similarly, within the context of Anthropocene studies it has been argued that humour functions as a coping strategy against the threats that climate change represents: 'comedic communications about climate change increase salience of climate change and expose audiences to new ways of learning about associated threats, challenges and opportunities' (Boykoff and Osnes 2019: 155).

Humorous stories originating from nuclear disasters is another good example of the therapeutic potential of humour. Nuclear disasters have horrible local-scale consequences, and normally also have long time environmental and health impacts at national and international levels. The nuclear accident in Chernobyl, Ukraine, in April 1986 was a local disaster which brought into the traditional local culture a new form of folklore, the so-called 'Chernobyl folklore'. This after-crisis/disaster folklore consists of various narrative forms that followed in the wake of the accident, such as rumours, personal narratives, children's games, short rhyming poems (chastushkas), parodies of popular songs, and also jokes (Fialkova 2001).

At the times of crisis, humour brings hope, but in certain socio-spatial conditions, humour may be the only available option to criticize the prevailing political contexts. People living under politically repressive conditions often use humour, for example in the form of narrative jokes and riddles, in order to vent anger and frustration (Brandes 1977: 331). In oppressive political systems, telling forbidden jokes are risky which, according to Christie Davies (2007) who uses the example of jokes under communism, functions as a form of quiet

protest. Joking under communism is a fine example of how humour works as a narrative method for being-in-society; Davies (291) writes

the jokes were a genuinely people's humour, an authentic folk humour, for they were totally excluded from the mass media; they were "whispered jokes" that could not be published in the countries where they were told. They were the jokes of the powerless against the absolutely powerful. They were a collective product, for jokes have no authors and no discernible origin.

The history of colonialism sets a specific sociopolitical context within which humour attains unique forms of territorial meanings. For instance in Nigeria jokes function 'as a means through which an emergent civil society, "behaving badly", subverts, deconstructs, and engages with the state' (Obadare 2009: 241). Humour thus produces particular cultural idioms that structure the modalities of resistance and regeneration of the civil society (261). The social conditions in oppressive political systems are also linked to the complexity of defining the concept of crisis. In post-colonial societies people are not negotiating the repercussions of crisis 'attacks', but rather living generation after generation under crisis circumstances, where humour functions as a coping mechanism. Analogous to James C. Scott's classic analysis of peasantry in Malay society *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), humour can be understood as an everyday form of resistance (see Kuipers 2008: 369-70).

One factor bringing previous examples together is that humour is often used, not only as a therapeutic tool helping people to live and survive at the times of crisis, but also as a narrative tool intrinsically linked to the feelings of togetherness and community building (see more in Ridanpää 2017). From that perspective, the nature of the societal impacts of COVID-19 crisis has been different. The global spreading of COVID-19 was followed by administrative responses begging and forcing people to stay inside their homes, to avoid all contact with other people, to stay alone. Through modern media 'laughing together' is enabled, but what slows it from happening is the simple emotion that characterizes pandemic diseases, that is, a globally shared fear of being together. Thus, it may be challenging to laugh at COVID-19, and the other question, naturally, is whether it is too early to joke about this topic? The answer is that we cannot help it from happening. Late night TV programs and internet forums are already full of COVID-19 jokes and memes and the first Coronavirus joke books are being published. One of them, Dr. Hackinkoff's *101 Coronavirus Jokes: Laughing Your Way Through Troubled Times* (2020), starts with an author's preface:

Dear Readers

There is no doubt that the outbreak of COVID-19, also known as Corona Virus is a very serious issue. However, I was raised to believe that if you can't laugh at the toughest of times, then you end up crying at your eyes at.

I hope all of my readers will know this joke book is not about minimizing the crisis, it's about sharing the human stress-reliever of laughter at an incredibly difficult time.

Let's all hope that laughter is indeed the best medicine.

Sincerely,

Dr. H

The question is thus not about whether laughing at Coronavirus is appropriate, but rather about how we, as readers, understand the logic, function and socio-emotional aspects of humour. Laughter is first and foremost an emotional reaction, an individual human reaction, that has its societal codes, but which are far from fixed. On *amazon.com* many reader comments for Hackinkoff's book emphasized how laughing is exactly what the world needs now and that:

Timing couldn't be any better! Laughs and giggles and several jokes that had me bust a gut! Thanks for lightening the "heaviness" of this time! (Dinarae Camarda)

Had a lot of fun laughing at these cornball jokes.. Just what the doctor ordered. A little lightening up of the mood. (Janie)

If you need a good life during a difficult time. (Sharain)

On the other hand, the readers of books such as *101 Coronavirus Jokes* cannot be forced to accept the argument about the therapeutic force of humour or to persuade to agree that laughing during difficult times is a fresh starting point:

i am not a customer and absolutely do not plan to be. but i MUST write a review & remind you that PEOPLE are dying from this. have more common courtesy and stop the ignorance. STOP THE IGNORANCE!!! (Ivan Guerrero)

Laughing at COVID-19 may make you feel irritated and angry, but on the other hand, it can also entail an impulse towards the global sense of togetherness, no matter how discouraging the orders to 'stay at home' may feel. Sheila Hones (2020) asks, what kind of literary geographies are possible and helpful at the times when people live inside their cubes of loneliness? I am proposing such a geographical study of literature in which humour is not necessarily a research topic or a studied material but rather a sentiment embedded in our manners of reading and interpreting texts as well as perceiving the world. To recapitulate the main argument, what this all adds up to is that humour, in all its forms and varieties, is in many ways an inherently serious cultural institution. For most people, the claim that 'humour is serious' sounds paradoxical, but as various multi-disciplinary (sociology, critical geopolitics,

cultural geography, cultural studies, psychology, etc.) studies of humour have demonstrated, the ‘it’s just in jest’ claim is a fundamentally wrong-headed attitude when evaluating the role that humour occupies in contemporary society.

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