"Who to save?":
Towards a social critique of antiracist (?) humorous criticism

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to put forward a critical analytical schema for discriminatory humor, taking into consideration the incongruity and aggression/superiority theories of humor and the notion of social critique as conceptualized by Reisigl and Wodak (2001). Emphasis is placed on how humorous texts, which appear to criticize racist practices and values, turn out to be ambiguous by also reproducing them, thus constituting instances of liquid racism (Weaver 2016). In particular, we analyze three internet memes comparing two different disastrous events: the Titan submersible implosion and the Messenia migrant boat sinking, both occurring in June 2023. Our textual analysis at the micro-level in terms of humor theories constitutes a form of text immanent critique, as it brings to the surface the logical contradictions/incongruities included in the texts; namely, the fact that, although a large number of migrants lose their lives, Western authorities do little to save them. At the macro-level of analysis, the sociodiagnostic critique reveals the manipulative character of antiracist discourse with which the internet memes under scrutiny seem to align. We argue that this hypocritical, as we could call it, antiracist discourse obscures the origins of the problem, i.e., the existence and strengthening of the borders and related practices, which are not humorously questioned or even ridiculed in the data examined here. We conclude by discussing the underlying assumptions that could contribute to creating humorous texts that offer an unambiguous antiracist perspective on contemporary racist acts.

> Sacrifice is a primary act of worship. Sacrificing border transgressors is part of the worship of the nation-state and acknowledgement of its sovereignty.
>
> (Khosravi 2010:29)

1. Introduction

The present study subscribes to Critical Humor Studies (CHS), aiming to investigate how humorous texts may reproduce various forms of social discrimination (racism, sexism, classism, ageism, etc.). The entertaining dimension of humor and its allegedly inconsequential nature (cf., *it's just a joke; I was just kidding*) may lead people to overlook the derogatory stereotypes and unequal power relations among groups, which are often reinforced via humorous texts. A critical perspective on humor intends to reveal how and why humorists may recycle discriminatory standpoints and values and, simultaneously, how and why humor recipients could identify such standpoints and values, and resist them (see, among others, Archakis and Tsakona 2019; 2021; Billig 2001; Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Pérez 2022; Weaver 2016).

For the present study, we draw on certain concepts coming from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which are compatible with the goals of CHS, as they both aim to unveil and oppose social inequalities and discrimination (Fairclough 2003; van Dijk 2008). In particular, a central principle of CDA concerns the relationship between the macro- and micro-level analysis. The macro-level involves the dominant (social, linguistic, educational, political, religious, moral) values and views, that is, the hegemonic discourses via which the representation and organization of social reality are attempted (Fairclough 2003). The concept of *discourse* refers to specific semantic relations on the basis of which aspects of social reality are represented from a particular perspective (Fairclough 2003; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:143). The micro-level involves the discoursal strategies and texts through which individuals position themselves towards the macro-level discourses (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:591-593; van Dijk 2008:85-89). In the present study, humorous internet memes will be examined as texts at the micro-level, namely as humorists' positionings towards the macro-level discourses, here the racist and antiracist discourses.

In what follows, we examine three internet memes that refer to two different public events simultaneously: the Titan submersible implosion (Wikipedia 2024b) and the Messenia migrant boat sinking (Wikipedia 2024a), both occurring in June 2023. The memes under scrutiny concisely compare the two events by aligning with antiracist discourse: they humorously criticize the huge publicity and expensive rescue efforts for the submersible (with five rich men on board) compared to the less publicized, reluctant, and with limited resources rescue efforts for the migrant

boat (with several hundred migrants[1] from Africa and Asia on board). We will argue that the criticism in the form of humorous memes may superficially appear to serve antiracist, pro-migrant goals through highlighting and condemning the inequality between the two rescue expeditions. Still, simultaneously the same memes surreptitiously reproduce racist values and norms by not critically addressing the racio-national reasons which forced the migrants to travel in such conditions and led to the sinking of the migrant boat. Such an ambiguity renders the memes instances of *liquid racism* (Archakis and Tsakona 2024; Weaver 2016).

More specifically, in section 2, we attempt to define racist and antiracist discourse, paying particular attention to the ways state borders are perceived within these discourses. We highlight the blurred boundaries and overlap between racist and antiracist discourse, as well as the omnipresence of racist discrimination and prejudice in contemporary nation-states, even if social agents may not always be aware of it. In section 3, we discuss criticism as a core sociopragmatic function of humor, as more or less explicitly suggested by the *incongruity* and *superiority/aggression* theories of humor. From the perspective of these theories, we elaborate on both racist and antiracist humor. Although in principle they are opposed, in practice it is not always easy to distinguish one from the other. In section 4, we discuss the notion of *social critique*: Reisigl and Wodak (2001) propose three interrelated aspects of social critique which will be implemented in the analytical section 6 and the concluding section 7. In section 5, we present the data under scrutiny and, in section 6, we analyze them in terms of the above-mentioned theories of humor, which are combined with Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) approach to social critique. Finally, section 7 includes a summary of our findings and compares the hypocritical, as we call it, antiracist discourse and an unambiguous antiracist post-national discourse as part of what Reisigl and Wodak (2001) call *prospective critique*.

2. Oscillating between racist and antiracist discourses

In van Dijk's (2008:103) terms, racist discourse reproduces "social practices of discrimination", which are based on "socially shared and negatively oriented mental representations of Us about Them" (see also van Dijk 1991, 1992). Racist discourse turns out to be one of the most efficient means for the achievement of national homogenization since it intends to eradicate or assimilate the (linguistic, cultural, or other) difference of the Other through discrimination and denigration (Christopoulos 2004:346).

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[1] We use the term *migrant* as an umbrella term including immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, etc. In our view, if emphasis is placed on people's need to move towards a place for various reasons, such terminological/legal differences may not be that important (see also Archakis and Tsakona 2024:2).

In particular, given that within a nation-state one single culture, one language, and specific 'common' values are usually considered to be acceptable, racio-national discourse achieves homogeneity by giving privileges and advantages, that is, economic and political power as well as access to resources, only to those who consent to its linguacultural directives while excluding the Others (Golash-Boza 2016:133).

Furthermore, the racio-national discourse points to "divisions and exclusions […] fostered between 'host populations,' whose life and wealth should be enhanced, and the racialized refugees who, from a state-based perspective, would threaten the well-being of the former" (Aradau and Tazzioli 2019:6). In a similar vein, Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2022:32) put forward the *dehumanization* thesis to explain how human quality is ascribed to certain bodies, not all of them:

> humanity does not preexist the body as a fixed quality that belongs to all but, rather, that it is an attribute selectively attached to certain bodies over others in the process of giving meaning to these bodies within certain contexts of power. In this account, migrants are selectively construed as "human" […].

As a result, *necropolitics*, that is, the "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 2003:39), or *thanatopolitics* defined by Agamben (1998:122) as the moment when "the decision on life becomes a decision on death'", are implemented at the expense of the 'threatening' racialized refugees (see Aradau and Tazzioli 2019:6).

In this context, state borders and *border deaths* (Squire 2017) prove to be significant for racio-national goals. Since 1990, migrant movements towards Greece have disturbed the national homogeneity. Thus, one of the main concerns of the Greek racio-national discourse has been to restore Greek homogeneity through strict border surveillance. The "ideology of repelling migration at the external borders" (Chatzi 2004:248) is implemented by tight border policing, harsh cross-border controls, as well as violent deportations and pushbacks. Such processes aiming to restore the purity of the Greek nation-state as part of the European 'fortress' result in thousands of migrants losing their lives. Khosravi's (2010:28) remarks are quite revealing, indicating the role of borders in "Fortress Europe" and in the rich Western world, in general:

> [t]he borders that separate the rich from the poor world demand more sacrifice than do the borders separating poor countries from each other. […] Today, the borders between poor world and rich world are turned into an exhibit of death (Inda 2007:148). Not unexpectedly, the highest rate of sacrifice of border transgressors takes place on the Mexico–USA border and on the borders of

Fortress Europe. While the former on average demands 500 sacrificial human beings per year, the latter on average demands more than 700 lives. On average more than three persons die daily along these borders. […] The Mediterranean Sea has turned into a cemetery for transgressive travelers, and the floating dead bodies washing up on the shores of European tourist islands are evidence of border-necropolitics.

At the same time, and despite this oppressive function of racio-national discourse and racio-national borders, in the Western world, the humanitarian and antiracist values of tolerance and acceptance of difference are in wide social circulation (van Dijk 1992:95-97). In particular, antiracism is opposed to "biological racism" and "many other forms of discriminatory discourse" (Bonnett 2000:177-178). Antiracism could be understood as "any theory and/or practice (whether political or personal) that seeks to challenge, reduce, or eliminate manifestations of racism in society" (O'Brien 2009:501). Antiracist discourse aims to change patterns of privilege and power relations by putting forward humanitarian values that have emerged from within social movements during at least the past three centuries. These movements have opposed slavery and racial segregation in North and South America, antisemitism and Nazism in Europe, Apartheid in South Africa, and European colonialism all over the world, and have defended human and civil rights for minorities (Archakis and Tsakona 2024:8; Maeso 2015:63; van Dijk 2021). Particular emphasis has been placed on human dignity, which has become a term "integral to the development of humanitarian law and to the development of various constitutional legal frameworks during the 20th century" (Squire 2017:526).

From an antiracist perspective, state borders serve an exclusionary, racist, and eventually inhumane function. As Khosravi (2010:98-99) points out,

> [t]hrough "inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 1998:17), undesirable people –'illegal' migrants, refugees and quasi-citizens are positioned on the threshold between *in* and *out*. Their experience is indistinct from the operation of the nation-state and their very existence is indistinct from the border (Raj 2006). By rebordering politics, the sovereign power does not merely exclude undesirable people, but penalizes and regulates them, by immobilizing them in detention centers, by ignominious and terrifying threats of deportation, or by racialized internal border control – all of which turns the citizen into a quasi-citizen (emphasis in the original).

The coexistence of racist and antiracist discourses often results in speakers oscillating between the two, since, on the one hand, they wish to portray themselves as

tolerant and antiracist individuals, and on the other, standpoints and practices that eventually reinforce their own privileges and powerful positions. For instance, anti-racist claims (e.g., *I'm not racist*) and racist ones (e.g., *but I don't want to coexist with mi-grants*) co-occur, which leads to discursive ambiguities often hard to detect (Archakis and Tsakona 2022:165; 2024:14; see also Archakis 2022). By using such expressions, the majority of people exonerate themselves from accusations of racism and deny their own acceptance and reproduction of racist values.

Furthermore, by coexisting with national discourse, antiracist discourse ends up defending the rights not of every human being regardless of their origins and iden-tities, but only of the national citizens, at least in the European national states and in the Western world (see Chouliaraki 2013; Douzinas 2011). As Khosravi (2010:121) points out, the discussion about human rights is usually premised on the nation-state system: "human rights are based on civil rights, that is, citizens' rights," and thus "human rights can only be achieved through the nation-state system."

Weaver (2016) calls the coexistence of racist and antiracist meanings in the same (con)texts *liquid racism*. More specifically, liquid racism

> does not produce a monolithic reading as racism […]. It has a structure that is constructed with far more potential for ambivalence. […] [L]iquid racism should not be seen as a weakened or challenged residue of racism but rather as an ambiguous form that is *encouraged* nowadays and one that weakens various defenses against claims of racism (Weaver 2016:63-64, emphasis in the original).

Liquid racism poses significant challenges to contemporary speakers because it is difficult to detect. In Archakis and Tsakona's (2024:21) terms, "the boundar-ies between racist and antiracist discourse are blurred and multiple interpretations emerge from the same utterance or text, both racist and antiracist ones." Conse-quently, liquid racism "requires reflexivity in the reader when questions are asked on its meaning, social impact or implications for the self" (Weaver 2016:153). Criti-cal analyses of humorous discourse have demonstrated that such ambivalences are not uncommon therein: humor attempting to ridicule racist stereotypes and chal-lenge racist practices and views may eventually reproduce them in an entertaining, uncritical manner. It may also be employed to mitigate or disguise social discrimi-nation. In both cases, racist values and views often go unnoticed in humorous texts and thus become naturalized through liquid racism (Assimakopoulos and Piata 2024; Tsakona 2019; 2024a; 2024b; Tsami, Skoura and Archakis 2024; Weaver 2010; 2016). So, in what follows, we elaborate on the critical dimension of humor and its interplay with anti/racist discourses.

3. Humor as criticism

One of the most prominent and discussed sociopragmatic functions of humor is *criticism*. In fact, criticism appears to lie at the heart of humor, according to at least two of the main theories used for its analysis. First, the *incongruity* theory of humor maintains that humor is based on the incompatibility between what is deemed normal and abnormal, between what is expected and what violates our expectations in a particular context. It evolves around ideas, events, actions, etc., which deviate from our conceptualizations about aspects of social reality. In this sense, humor is based on *assessment*: we *evaluate* things as incongruous, incompatible, unexpected, abnormal, etc., thus more or less directly criticizing them or those persons responsible for, or related to, them.

The *superiority/aggression* theory of humor also connects it with criticism. By conceptualizing humor as a form of disapproving and even hostile behavior addressed to individuals, groups, ideas, institutions, etc., *assessed* as inferior and below our expectations, it once again renders criticism the core of humor. According to this theory, humor is employed to criticize aberrant, abnormal, antisocial, unconventional, etc. behaviors and, simultaneously, to more or less indirectly ask of the targets of its criticism to 'correct' themselves, reconsider their actions and ideas, etc., to conform to what is perceived as acceptable, normal, and conventional (on both theories, see among others Attardo 2024[1994]; Morreall 2009; Weaver 2016).

Given the above, racist humor represents sociocultural variation as incongruous and more often than not criticizes and denigrates minority groups so as either to contribute to their marginalization and exclusion or to force them to conform to dominant social norms and conventions by 'correcting' themselves, namely by adjusting their values, behaviors, and ideas to those prevailing among majority members (Billig 2001; Pérez 2022; Santa Ana 2009). On the other hand, antiracist humor represents racism as incongruous and criticizes its proponents for their values and practices. Thus, it attempts to defend minority groups and to support sociocultural variation and human rights. At the same time, antiracist humor challenges social discrimination and division by promoting more inclusive and equal conceptualizations of social relations (Feldman and Borum Chattoo 2019).

Although in principle racist and antiracist humor work in opposition to one another, relevant research has shown that it is not easy or straightforward to distinguish one from the other due to liquid racism (see section 2 and references therein). More specifically, it is often observed that canned jokes, political cartoons, satirical news, stand-up performances, and other humorous genres referring to racial discrimination and criticizing it end up reproducing it surreptitiously. In other words, even though humorists may have antiracist intentions, they may -more or less consciously- circulate and hence reinforce racist values and views by disguising them as antiracist.

In this context, our primary goal is to demonstrate how the analysis of humor as a form of criticism and in terms of the incongruity and superiority / aggression theories, could constitute the basis for a critical approach revealing its opposed and ambivalent (i.e. racist and antiracist) interpretations. To this end, besides the two above-mentioned theories, we resort to the concept of *critique* as defined within CDA. It should be noted at this point that there is extensive literature on the similarities and subtle differences between the notions of *criticism* and *critique*, especially among (political) philosophers (see, among others, Castree 2006; He 2016). In the present study, we will use the term *criticism* to refer to the sociopragmatic function of humor, and the term *critique* to refer to the critical analysis of humor put forward here.

4. Critique in the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis

Foucault (1997:31) maintains that *critique* involves "not accepting as true […] what an authority tells you is true, or at least not accepting it because an authority tells you that it is true." In a similar vein, *critique* constitutes a process of "denaturalization of the taken-for-granted understandings of reality" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:185), namely the process of denoting that "the entities which we see as objective and natural are, in reality, contingent combinations of elements which could always have been articulated differently" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:186). Such a resistant and concurrently potentially transformative quality of critique is underlined by Mc-Carney (1990:109, as cited in Castree 2006:257), who, echoing Marx (1976), observes that critique is an act "not of judging the present but of disclosing its potentiality of making manifest what is latent and bringing to the surface what is active only in a subterranean way."

We will attempt to elaborate on such understandings of critique by following Reisigl and Wodak's (2001:32-35) three interrelated aspects of *social critique*:

1. *text immanent critique* aiming at discovering text-internal logical contradictions and inconsistencies;
2. *sociodiagnostic critique* aiming at demystifying the 'manipulative' character of discursive practices;
3. *prospective critique* aiming at improving communication and, in general, the transformation of the social structures.

The first aspect of critique proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2001) focuses on the text-internal inconsistencies at the micro-level, i.e., on logically opposing standpoints, as well as on the fact that these inconsistencies are covered up and, thus, are not easily

discernible due to the manipulative, distorted character of the hegemonic discourse in the macro-level. Moving on to the macro-level, the manipulative combination of discourses is revealed through the sociodiagnostic critique, when the dominant discourse is compared to an antagonistic one. This comparison between antagonistic discourses eventually leads us to the third aspect of critique, namely the *prospective critique* offering an alternative and transformative perspective on communication and social relations and structures (see also Archakis 2025).

After describing our data (section 5), we employ text immanent critique and sociodiagnostic critique to critically analyze the memes under scrutiny (section 6). Then, we reflect on the resistant and transformative potential of humor as part of the prospective critique (section 7).

5. The data of the study

The data analyzed here compares two disastrous events that took place in June 2023 under totally different circumstances. The first one is the so-called *Messenia migrant boat disaster* (Wikipedia 2024a): on June 14th, a badly-kept, overloaded with migrants fishing boat coming from Tobruk, Libya, sank off the coast of Pylos, Greece, an event which was later on characterized as "a tragedy of unimaginable proportions, all the more so because it was entirely preventable" (Adriana Tidona, as cited in Rakshit 2023). The boat entered Greek waters on June 13th and was (allegedly) offered help by the Greek authorities, which was (also allegedly) declined as the boat was bound for Italy. Under circumstances that are still being investigated by Greek and international authorities, the boat capsized and sank. More than 750 people from Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Afghanistan drowned, 82 dead bodies were recovered from the sea, and only 104 men were rescued.

According to Wikipedia (2004a), "[t]he European Ombudsman is investigating accusations that European Union (EU) border protection agency, Frontex, and the HCG [i.e., Hellenic Coast Guard] did not take preventative steps to avoid the shipwreck." This disaster is due to the EU and Greek authorities' efforts to guard the borders to keep migrants outside "Fortress Europe" (see section 2). The Greek authorities have been accused of not taking the appropriate measures to save the boat's passengers and even contributing to its capsizing and sinking while attempting to tow it, most probably towards Italian waters. Greek authorities also refused to recover the boat and the rest of the bodies with the pretext that such an expedition would be too difficult and expensive, since the boat sank in the deepest point of the Mediterranean Sea. Unfortunately, such disasters have not been uncommon since 2014 in the Mediterranean Sea, leading to a large number of casualties, as migrants from Asia or Africa attempt to enter Europe via Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain, or France.

Almost at the same time as these were happening in the Mediterranean Sea, the second disaster took place in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada: the so-called *Titan submersible implosion* (Wikipedia 2024b). The American company OceanGate operated the Titan submersible, which was then used to take its passengers on a visit to the wreckage of the Titanic. On board the submersible were, besides the company's CEO, a famous French deep-sea explorer and Titanic expert acting as the submersible pilot, a British businessman, and a Pakistani-British businessman with his son. The price for this trip was $250,000 per person. On June 18th, only 1 hour and 45 minutes after the submersible had left the mother ship, communication between the two was lost. A few hours later, a massive search and rescue operation was launched

> by an international team organized by the United States Coast Guard (USCG), USN, and Canadian Coast Guard. Support was provided by aircraft from the Royal Canadian Air Force and United States Air National Guard, a Royal Canadian Navy ship, as well as several commercial and research vessels and ROVs [i.e., remotely operated underwater vehicles] (Wikipedia 2024b).

A few days later, a debris field (also including human remains) was discovered close to the Titanic wreckage, which led investigators to the conclusion that an implosion of the pressure chamber killed all five passengers instantly (Wikipedia 2024b).

The two disasters were discursively brought together and compared by online news, which criticized the limited media or other attention paid to the migrant boat (see, among others, Rakshit 2023; Rosenberg 2023; Sharp 2023; Walfisz 2023).[2] This comparison also features in the data examined here, offering a critical comment on social discrimination in terms of both social class[3] and, most importantly, in the present study, sociocultural origin: the memes employ humor to criticize the racist differences between the two rescue operations.[4] In the case of the migrant boat of 750

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[2] Interestingly, on June 23rd, i.e. one day before the debris was discovered, in two different public appearances in Greece, Barack Obama criticized the lack of media or other attention on the migrant boat and the respective disaster, and compared it to the huge attention dedicated to the search expedition to locate the missing submersible. He attributed this difference to the "untenable situation" (Stavros Niarchos Foundation 2023) of "obscene inequality" and "massive concentration of wealth" (NowThis Impact 2023).

[3] Due to space limitations, and to our focus on racism, the classist aspect of the comparison will not be elaborated on in the present study, but will be left for future inquiry.

[4] Most probably, the online articles, Obama's statements (see footnote 2), and the memes examined here are part of a *resemiotization* process (i.e. a meaning transformation process from one context to the other; see Iedema 2003). However, we cannot accurately trace the stages of this process, since we cannot establish whether the authors of the articles were aware of Obama's statements, or vice versa, and since we have no information about the place, time, and creators of the memes.

or more passengers, Greek and EU authorities failed to lead the boat safely to Greek or Italian shores. In contrast, the US and Canadian authorities organized a massive and extremely expensive operation to rescue the five upper-class citizens.

These memes come from a large corpus (283 English and Greek) retrieved from online sources from July 23rd, 2023, until May 3rd, 2024, and referring to the Titan submersible disaster. The producers of such humor were severely criticized for a lack of empathy and amoral behavior as they were perceived as making fun of people who were in grave danger and then confirmed as deceased due to the implosion of the vessel (see, among others, Rakshit 2023; Rosenberg 2023; Walfisz 2023). The three memes examined here represent a very small but not insignificant (at least from an anti/racist perspective) percentage of this corpus (1.06 per cent). They will be analyzed as instances of antiracist humor defending migrants' right to cross the borders, enter the EU safely, and become accepted by European people and authorities.

In general, memes constitute a significant part of speakers' online experiences in social media platforms: they are perceived as digital artefacts conveying cultural information and sociopolitical stances by drawing on multiple intertextual sources and multiplying rather quickly, as speakers redesign them to suit their own communicative and social purposes. Memes usually capture a specific time, context, and affect while reflecting and enhancing speaker involvement and everyday creativity. Given that memes are based on the combination of semiotic resources coming from different sources and carrying various connotations, they can be used for the representation and dissemination of complex ideas and values, often in an unconventional manner (see, among others, Divita 2022; Shifman 2014; Tsakona 2024a:68; Wiggins 2019). It is therefore not unexpected that, as we intend to show, contradictory interpretations may be derived from them: the emergence of both racist and antiracist meanings renders the memes under scrutiny instances of liquid racism.

Figure 1.

6. Data analysis

The three memes (Figures 1-3) exhibit both similarities and differences, the latter mostly pertaining to the semiotic resources employed to convey the same, more or less, message:
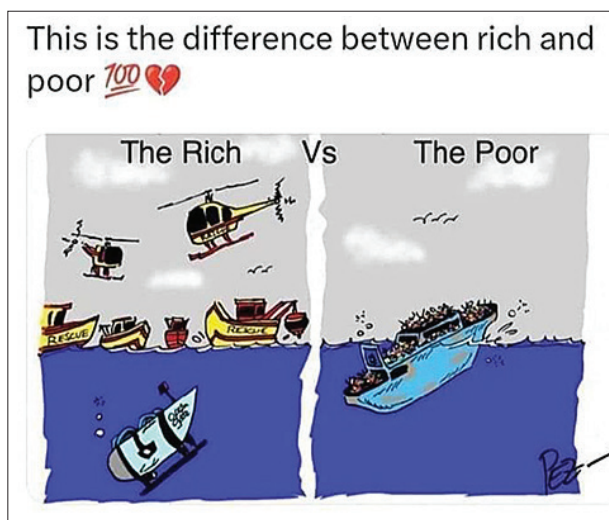

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

From an incongruity theory perspective, their humor is based on the incongruous difference between the two rescue operations:[5] the reluctant, unsuccessful, and with limited resources Greek/EU one, and the well-organized and expensive US/Canadian one. It is humorously proposed to "tighten the borders" for "750 missing migrants" (see Figure 1) and to abandon "a few hundred migrants fleeing war" (Figure 2) or "the poor" (Figure 3). Instead, it is also humorously proposed to save "5 rich missing men" (Figure 1) or "a few tourists that can afford $250,000 dip into the ocean" (Figure 2) or "the rich" (Figure 3). The juxtaposition of the two operations is premised on antiracist assumptions to the effect that human lives are equally important, precious, and eventually worth-preserving, whether we talk about wealthy and prestigious citizens or about poor, border-crossing migrants. In other words, the humorous incongruity constituting the core of these memes emerges from the comparison between the unequal sociopolitical and financial particularities of the two expeditions, bringing to the surface the racist (and classist) treatment of migrants risking their lives to reach the West. In this sense, the humor of these memes could be characterized as pro-migrant and antiracist.

Interestingly, the two opposed scripts are inferred from the context[6] (e.g., the news reports about the relevant events) rather than explicitly represented in the memes, especially regarding the Messenia migrant boat disaster. National borders and border guards are not depicted in any memes under scrutiny. Instead, their actions are evoked through short utterances only: the incongruous script of guarding the borders as a national/racist act is not visually represented. It only appears in Figure 1 via the directive "tighten the borders." The same holds for the antiracist script of rescuing hundreds of migrants from drowning, which is only briefly mentioned via the verb "save" in Figure 2. It therefore seems that these memes are addressed to readers who are familiar with both disasters and can recall the relevant details without being provided too many cues.

The superiority/aggression theory of humor allows us to trace the humorous target, namely, who is to blame for such a racist treatment of migrants. The above-mentioned incongruous difference between the two rescue operations appears to be attributed to Western supra/national authorities, especially the EU/Greek ones, who, according to these memes and media reports, prioritized guarding the borders over

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[5] It should be noted here that there may be readers who may not find the incongruity identified here humorous: indeed, incongruity is a prerequisite for humor but can trigger a variety of other, non-humorous reactions, such as disgust, terror, anxiety, and puzzlement, depending on one's background knowledge, ideological standpoints, or affective stance (see among others Morreall 2009:12-15; Tsakona 2020:48-62; 2024:39-65). However, since memes are usually created to convey a humorous perspective on social events, we assume that the data examined here could be perceived as humorous to at least a part of their intended audience.

[6] Opposing scripts contributing to the creation of humor may be evoked or even *inferred* from the text (see Attardo 2001:47-60).

saving the migrants. Such a racist treatment is highlighted through the comparison to the US/Canadian authorities' operation, which is humorously targeted for costing a significant amount of money to rescue only five people. Hence, an antiracist assumption is brought to the surface once again: Western states are humorously targeted and criticized for neglecting large groups of unwanted 'foreigners' at peril, but doing their best for a limited number of 'distinguished' citizens.

From a semiotic perspective, all the memes are divided into two parts to highlight the racism-related differences between the rescue operations. In two of them (Figures 1-2), easily recognizable photos from the media are used so that the (informed) audience can grasp the incongruous differences between the two operations. In contrast, Figure 3 includes a painted representation of the rescue operations, which seems to be based on related media photos as well. Interestingly, Figure 2 employs a popular meme template, that is, the *Drakeposting* meme,[7] to show approval of the US/Canadian operation and disapproval of a hypothetical attempt to rescue the migrants, thus attacking racist (and classist) discrimination through an ironic reversal.

Framing the preceding analysis in terms of Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) approach to social critique, and focusing on those parts of the memes which refer to the Messenia disaster, it could be suggested that the analysis in terms of humor theories at the micro-level, constitutes a form of text immanent critique, as it brings to the surface the logical contradictions included in the text and, in the present case, producing the humorous effect. It should be remembered here that, in humorous texts in particular, inconsistencies and contradictions are the *sine qua non*: humor relies on incongruity, namely on events, actions, situations, etc., violating social norms and expectations (see section 3). Here, antiracist perceptions about the value of human lives are framed as normal, while the racist discrimination between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' lives is represented as incongruous and is ridiculed.

According to the sociodiagnostic critique at the macro-level, the antiracist dimension of such humor concentrates on the criticism against everyday, normalized racio-national practices (i.e., guarding the borders and controlling who is going to be saved while crossing them), but does not (dare to) address the ideological premises of these practices. It obscures the fact that the mere existence of borders between "desirable destinations and undesirable origins" (Peeren 2015:174) is a significant

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[7] 'Drakeposting' refers to a common meme of using two screen captures from Drake's 'Hotline Bling' music video to denote preference of one thing over another. The top image would be of Drake turning his head away from an adjacent image or text with his hand extended as if to reject the image outright. The bottom image would then be Drake looking at another adjacent image or text with a look of satisfaction on his face as he points to it. The implication is that he (or the user posting the overall picture) prefers the bottom thing over the top thing" (Meming Wiki 2024).

part of racio-national discourse and not humorously questioned or ridiculed in such humorous memes. In other words, it is taken for granted that Greek/EU officials guarding the borders have the power to control who will receive help. A post-modern, antiracist perspective would perceive the segregating function of borders as incongruous (see section 2).

In other words, what is humorously represented as a problem here (i.e., the fact that large numbers of migrants lose their lives and Western authorities do little to save them) draws our attention away from the racist-national origins of this situation (i.e., the enforcement of borders and the unequal power relations they embody). The sociodiagnostic critique of such humor would be premised on an antagonistic antiracist post-national discourse, according to which humor could (but does not) refer critically to the violence and inequality sustained by the borders and their guarding: people from outside Europe are forced to risk their lives to move away from places where they can no longer live. In doing so, they end up at the EU/Greek authorities' and majorities' mercy and (limited) benevolence, who are in control of who will be on which side of the borders.

In sum, even though the text's immanent critique achieved by the analysis of humor in terms of incongruity and superiority/aggression theories supports an antiracist intention and interpretation of humor, the sociodiagnostic critique reveals a quite different story: pro-migrant and antiracist humor fails to effectively challenge the racist presuppositions of these texts. Instead, it takes the existence and guarding of the borders for granted and represents migrants as inferior and dominated by the powerful majority's officials. Thus, the majority members and authorities are expected to feel sorry for migrants risking their lives. Still, the role of the borders in this risky situation is not critically addressed via humor. In this sense, these memes could be perceived as instances of liquid racism involving contradictory, namely both racist and antiracist, interpretations.

In the following section, we summarize and discuss our findings. Additionally, we reflect on humor's resistant and transformative potential as part of the prospective critique.

7. Conclusion: Towards a prospective critique of humor

This paper adheres to CHS investigating how humor may (re)construct and perpetuate social inequalities in the form of stereotypes, xenophobia, and racism. To this end, we exploit CDA concepts that are compatible with CHS's goals. In particular, we draw on the concept of *discourse* and the distinction between the macro- and the micro-levels of analysis (Fairclough 2003). Our data consists of three internet memes comparing two different disastrous events: the Titan submersible implosion and the Messenia

migrant boat sinking, both occurring in June 2023. We argue that these humorous internet memes could be placed at the micro-level of analysis, functioning as humorists' positionings towards the racist and antiracist discourses.

The proposed analysis draws on incongruity and superiority/aggression theories of humor combined with Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) three interrelated aspects of social critique, i.e., text immanent critique, sociodiagnostic critique, and prospective critique. Thus, we attempt to scrutinize the critical function of humor, namely to identify the humorous incongruity and targets of the memes examined here and to explore how deeply this memetic criticism goes. Our semiotic/multimodal analysis at the micro-level in terms of humor theories constitutes a form of text immanent critique, as it brings to the surface the logical contradictions/incongruities included in the texts and targets the western authorities (i.e., the fact that western authorities do little to save migrants, even though they ought to). Thus, the humorous effect is produced.

Moving on to the macro-level of analysis, the sociodiagnostic critique reveals the manipulative character of the antiracist discourse with which the internet memes under scrutiny seem to align. More specifically, we argue that this hypocritical, as we could call it, antiracist discourse obscures the origins of the problem, i.e., the mere existence of borders which are not humorously questioned or even ridiculed in the data examined here. That is to say, the critical function of these memes stays within racio-national limits. It does not seem to challenge the naturalized 'necessity' of national borders, which is a key component of racio-national discourse. Hence, the majority of members and authorities are expected to sympathize with migrants risking and losing their lives. Still, the role of the borders in this precarious situation is not critically addressed via humor. In this sense, these memes could be perceived as instances of liquid racism involving contradictory, namely both racist and antiracist, interpretations.

The comparison between the hypocritical antiracist discourse including a hidden racio-national dimension that takes for granted the existence and segregating function of borders, on the one hand, and an unambiguous antiracist, post-national discourse that highlights the violence and inequality sustained by the borders and their guarding, on the other, could lead us to the third aspect of social critique, namely the *prospective critique* (see section 4). The post-national discourse challenges the traditional racio-national assumptions that survive in the hypocritical antiracist discourse, i.e., national "stability," strict "boundaries," and "uniformization" within state territory, language, and culture, by proposing "mobility," "fuzziness" and "multiplicity" instead (Blommaert and Rampton 2011:3-4; Heller 2008:512; see also Archakis 2016; 2025). Within a post-national discourse, a *prospective critique* of memes such as the ones examined here would put forward an alternative perspective drawing on assumptions such as the following:

[h]umane law does not recognize any border. Borders are constructed by in-humane minds. […] Being at home means belonging, but it also means con-structing borders and excluding the other. Any kind of group identification constructs the social category of the other. […] Homes are primarily sites of exclusion, not inclusion. The notion of the home nourishes racism and xeno-phobia. […] It is only in homelessness that genuine hospitality becomes pos-sible. Homelessness means not recognizing anywhere as home. Only in that condition is humanity not territorialized and can the plagues inherent in the nation-state system vanish and the 'botanical' way of thinking about human beings, in terms of roots, and the uncritical link between individuals and ter-ritory fade away. (Khosravi 2010:108, 94, 95; emphasis in the original)

In our view, humorous texts critically addressing core values and practices consti-tuting racio-national discourse could incite recipients to reflect on the taken-for-grant-ed-ness of state borders and their strict control, or, paraphrasing Khosravi's words quoted above, on the inhumane laws enforcing borders and exclusion. Hence, they could contribute to the promotion and social circulation of a post-national discourse, which could improve the communication and social relations between the majority and migrant populations. Based on the findings of our analysis, creating memes and public texts, in general, that univocally fight racism and the (explicit or implicit) ex-clusions it imposes -whether in the form of borders or in any other form- remains a significant challenge.

A prospective critique on ambivalent anti/racist humor could be explored through critical literacy endeavors focusing on the semiotics of humorous texts and aiming at sensitizing readers to the multiple and often opposing interpretations of such humor as well as at inciting them to reflect on everyday aspects of racism that are taken for granted and/or even perceived as antiracism. Through readers' semiotic analyses in terms of humor theories, comparisons with other (non-)humorous texts on the same topic, and attempts at producing antiracist humorous material, they could realize not only the evaluative/critical but also the discriminatory dimensions of humor, which may be lurking under its entertaining façade (on critical literacy activities, see Tsakona 2019; 2020:181-188; Tsami, Skoura and Archakis 2024, and references therein).

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