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Post-Structuralism

When Modernism ended, the consequences were catastrophic. Art suddenly meant something, the marginalized were beginning to be heard, and just about everything was available as a commodity. Artists were referencing history, and communicating with their audience, asking more of them when viewing their work since it was acceptable for art to have a message. Once deconstructed, this message from the artist had layers of meaning. This is the realm of parody, where history is referenced and creativity permeates. While parody has been around, probably since the second or third text, the Post---Modern era exemplifies parody. It is this time when parody structures much of modern culture, and by examining the structure of parody, we can better understand the purpose of much of the art created in this time.

Using semiotics, we can begin to understand parody better. Semiotics examines signs, language, and their functions. Signs and images function as both the signifier and the object, meaning the image represents both the word of the item, and the actual item the image is representing. This happens through the process of signification, where the image can represent both language and reality.

Representing both becomes the “play of presence and absence” rooted in signification (Phiddian 680). This process of signification, however, depends on the culture where the signs and language are used. Every culture has its own unique language and system of signs, full of its own unique meanings, so the same word or sign can mean different things depending on its cultural context. Meanings can change across cultures, and also between givers and recipients of language and signs. When someone speaks, the language they use is loaded with meaning from the speaker’s culture, and this language is heard by someone using their own cultural language

repertoire, which may or may not be different. This occurs with both language and signs, and this is important to remember, especially when the conversation turns toward the postmodern.

Signs, or images, with their many layered meanings, exist in reality. This reality, according to Baudrillard, has been changing from imitation to hyperreality. Baudrillard describes how images become removed from reality through his successive “phases of detachment of the image from reality” (Baudrillard, *Precession*, 256). When the image is finally removed from reality, it is in a state of hyperreality. Here, the real comes into question, as the image “bears no relation to reality whatsoever” (256). Remembering that images, as well as language, have inherent meanings, when they do not relate to reality, how does one interpret them when they exist in a hyperreal state? What is real, what is imitation? The many layers of meaning become important when we begin to ask these kinds of questions.

When something real is imitated, or duplicated, it is a simulation. Both language and images can be simulated, duplicated, and the reality and meaning may be changed because of this simulation. In fact, the meanings may be changed on many levels, as every culture has its own system of language and signs. By interfering with reality, simulation can become dangerous, for example by questioning law and order and if it itself is merely a simulation (Baudrillard, *Precession*, 266).

Deconstructing the systems of language and images is an attempt to put order to these layers of elusive and changing meanings. This is a way to find meanings through various interpretations, which is important, as our meaning systems take place in these semiotic systems (Hutcheon, *Politics*, 179-80).

Considering how language and images are loaded with meaning, this position seems logical to understand the purpose and intent of such language and images. As we investigate parody, it becomes clear how parody functions as a form of deconstruction. When reading

selected signs or language, if it is read straight, or literal, it is misunderstood. It is worth remembering how signification plays with presence and absence, what cultural meanings might be inherent in the selection to both the giver and receiver of the selected text or image. Through parody and deconstructing the simulation, we can begin to find meanings through the imitation of the real.

Parody can be defined in many ways, but has a definite structure consisting of two key components. First, the parody takes from the original, or the real; second, the parody infuses creativity (Posner, 68). The intent varies among all parodied works, but these two elements are consistently present. In fact, parody could not occur without these criteria. The combination of these elements upset the “balance between form and content of the original and so focuses upon the familiar duality of form and content lying at the center of most inquiries into the aesthetic perception itself” (Kiremidjian, 233). Our aesthetic experience relies on form and content, and when the balance is shifted, we begin to question how form relates to content, and how we experience the aesthetic. This relates to the layered meanings in parody; it can be thought of as hidden messages within the work. It should be noted that, when using Plato’s view of art as imitation of an action (or nature), parody is not a work of art, “since it does not imitate an action in nature, it imitates another work of art, but in doing so, it reveals something about that work” (233). In a way, it seems as though this Platonic view of art shows how parody acts as a form of deconstruction, revealing these hidden messages through interpretation. Parody is rooted in the taking of the original, and infusing creativity, which upsets the balance in form and content, and the audience reacts. This is the basic structure of parody, and as a form of deconstruction, parody is loaded with meanings. Parody becomes one way to “process the data” and give it perspective (Caesar, 70). The types of parody, however, can be quite varied.

Parody is a derivative work, since it is taken from an original, which means the artist has spent a great deal of time and effort getting to know the subject. This can be seen as a “form of homage” to the original work on part of the parodist (Kiremidjian 234). What sets apart the original from the parody are the critical differences due to the creativity on the part of the parodist. These differences can be humorous, ironic, playful, or a form of ridicule, but we should remember that even “ridicule is a form of criticism” (Posner, 70-1). “Seriousness and purpose” can be in a work that is playful or ironic (Hutcheon, Politics, 186). This is often the case in parodies that are trying to provide “context for something” that would otherwise be insignificant (Caesar, 70). In fact, some parodies use the original work, instead of a target and turn it into a weapon for cultural critique. The original work becomes the “standard of excellence” the critique is based on (Posner, 70). The argument could be pointing to a “decline in standards since some ‘Golden Age’ ” in which the original was created, or some other dissimilarity between the context of the original work and the parody (70). Certainly, parody is entangled with the sublime, the original. Phiddian explains, “Parody is not serious or even polite in the face of claims to the sublime, but it is not just a joke. Indeed, it is logically and philosophically opposed to the absolutist claims and mimetic frauds sublimity depends on” (692). By being opposed to sublimity’s standards, parody can be an effective tool in cultural critiques. In order for these critiques to happen between parody and its audience, the audience must be familiar with the original, or parodied, work.

Parody cannot function without an audience. Parody begins and extends conversations and raises questions; it cannot do this without an audience. The most effective parody happens when the audience is familiar with the original work (Posner, 70). Often, such parody circulates around classicism or popular culture, as both are generally rather well known, or understood, by a large audience. When the work is accessible, the audience can begin the process of

deconstructing the parody and discover the hidden meanings. This knowledge base of the audience is important for them to recontextualize and respond to parody. Through some of parody's tactics, such as irony, the audience becomes informed and understands how to respond to the parody. However, these tactics may also introduce some of the audience to the original work for the first time. Sometimes the audience responds to the parody by reinvestigating the original, or for some, they have an opportunity to experience the original work for the first time. Most importantly, because parody seeks to be recontextualized, it demands an active audience. When parody invests in its audience, the audience becomes invested back. Most postmodern art operates in the same way as parody, by revisiting history, and requiring an active audience.

Postmodern art, many argue, began with the Pop Artists of the 1960s, who “[broke] ranks with the late modernists (Weisberg, 33). Pop Art was a response to popular culture, notably the American culture, of the 1960s. It was a time when commodities became a part of everyday lives and another way to structure, or divide, society. Pop artists used wit and puns, fused with pop culture and “visual juxtapositions,” which required its audience to become less passive when interacting with art (33). Pop art needs to be recontextualized if one wants to elicit meaning from it, much in the way parody functions.

Pop artist Richard Hamilton examined this booming culture of commercial products, science and technology, and the American “way of life” in his piece, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (Fig. 1). The collaged elements of the piece seem absurd at first; a signal to the audience that parody may be involved. Parody functions in Hamilton's piece when we recognize the underlying structure of the parody: taking from history and infusing creativity. In this instance, the history Hamilton is referencing is very recent history, the American cultural history of that time. Images and various products were distributed to the culture, demonstrating how to live in an updated kitchen, for example (Fig. 2-4). New products

in designer colors were invented to make life easier for the American homeowner. Everything was quickly becoming a commodity, becoming just an image, and Hamilton's version of "reality" is questioned. Combining various visual elements through collage allows Hamilton to engage with his audience, as form and content seem out of balance. This is how he uses his creativity, by arranging images known to the audience, in a way that leads to questions. While Hamilton's piece serves more as a critique of the culture with its audience, it should be remembered that other forms of parody simply amuse.

Taking from a similar history as Hamilton's piece, a parodic advertisement for an Apple iPod™ clearly references those from half a century earlier (Fig. 5). There does not appear to be a deeper, significant message to this parody, it serves its purpose as play.

Postmodern artists differed from the Modernists in that they looked back to history, and used this history to explain something in the artist's language. This is quite similar to the basic structure of parody, with its dual components of a taking of the original, which existed before the parody, making it history; and an infusion of creativity, expressed through the artist in his or her own unique system of language and signs. Poststructuralist Linda Hutcheon describes parody as "resolutely historical and inescapably political," which is also a helpful way to describe Postmodern art (Hutcheon, *Politics*, 180). In fact, she describes parody and postmodernism in such a way, the definitions seem to be interchangeable. "Inescapably political" describes a great deal of Postmodern art, and many artists look back to appropriate histories to better deliver their message.

Artist Barbara Kruger references history to make her work, specifically the "political photomontages and typographics by John Heartfield and Alexander Rodchenko" (Hopkins, 211). Using her design background from the magazine industry, Kruger incorporates the elements of photography and text from Heartfield and Rodchkeno's posters. Her "inescapably political"

messages are delivered by taking from an original, but making it her own, and infusing the work with meanings beyond the aesthetic, thus creating parody as well as Postmodern art (Fig. 6).

Kruger's work aggressively interacts with her audience, making the audience aware of power struggles and other cultural issues. The posters created by Heartfield, Rodchenko, and Kruger are political, and the bold designs draw the viewer's eye in to read its message. John Heartfield, whose original name was Helmut Hertzfeld, was an artist who served for a time in World War I with the German army. Germany had a strong anti-English campaign after World War I, coupled with a growing Nazi trend, and Helmut Hertzfeld changed his name to John Heartfield as a form of dissent. Heartfield created his posters that promoted Communism and denounced Hitler and the growing Third Reich (Fig. 7). His use of photomontage reached the people through magazines and portfolio reproductions with other artists. Alexander Rodchenko was a Soviet artist, working to support artists and the people of Russia (Fig. 8). His mastery of design and photography communicated with the people in a dynamic way. The purpose of his work was to "aggrandize the power and authority of a centralized government bureaucracy" (Kramer, par. 7). Both Heartfield and Rodchenko create political posters for the people with strong design elements, notably black and white photographs and bold text in aggressive colors. Kruger uses these design elements, in her own creative voice, to share her political message to her audience. Another example of parody using this similar history is the album art of Franz Ferdinand's 2005 album, *You Could Have it So Much Better* (Fig. 9). A clear taking of Rodchenko's *Lila Brick* poster is evident in this artwork (Fig. 8). Perhaps the artwork lends to other possible parodies within the music of the album, or the cover designer was simply paying homage to Rodchenko. In understanding the originals, the derivations and their respective differences are acknowledged, and the many meanings each individual member of the audience brings to the conversation lead to new understandings. Parody and Postmodern art both work

towards a discourse with their audiences, marking “both continuity and change”: continuity through the reference of history, and change with the artist’s creativity (Hutcheon, *Politics*, 204). Both result in forming questions, such as why certain ideologies exist and where they derive their power (Hutcheon, *Politics*, 200). While many parodies ask such questions, some parodies are created just to amuse, just as some Postmodern art is created for aesthetic purposes. The underlying structure still remains the same, with history and creativity, but fewer demands are placed on the audience, yet the pieces still both function as parody.

Postmodernism and parody intertwine with one another; taking from history, and infusing creativity describe both postmodernism and parody. By analyzing the semiotics of parody, this connection becomes clear: parody and postmodernism are symbiotic. Some see parody as a “parasitic genre,” where just about everything can be argued for (Phiddian, 689). In a way, this paper almost seems to make that claim, but this paper also shows that parody is a form of deconstruction. Parody extends the conversation, and causes the audience to ask questions. Some may question why certain formal elements have been used, or eliminated. Others may challenge how we perceive originality, reality, identity or history. These questions come from the artist, through the work, and from the audience.

Images (Fig. 1-9)



Fig.1. Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* 1956



Fig. 4. 1957 Live Better Electrically, a campaign started by General Electric in 1956 to increase demand for electricity

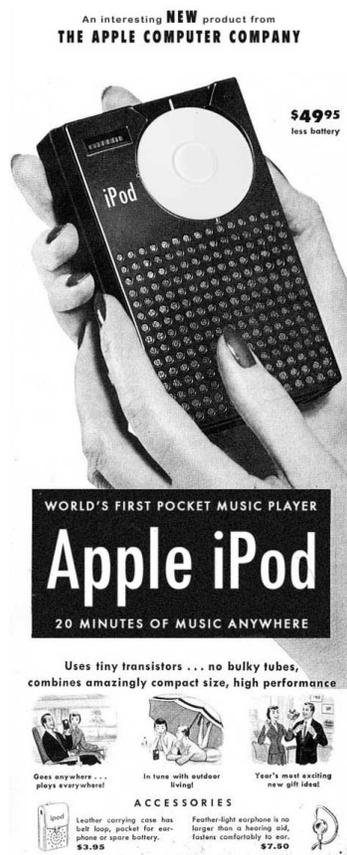


Fig. 5. Parody/Retro Apple iPod™ advertisement

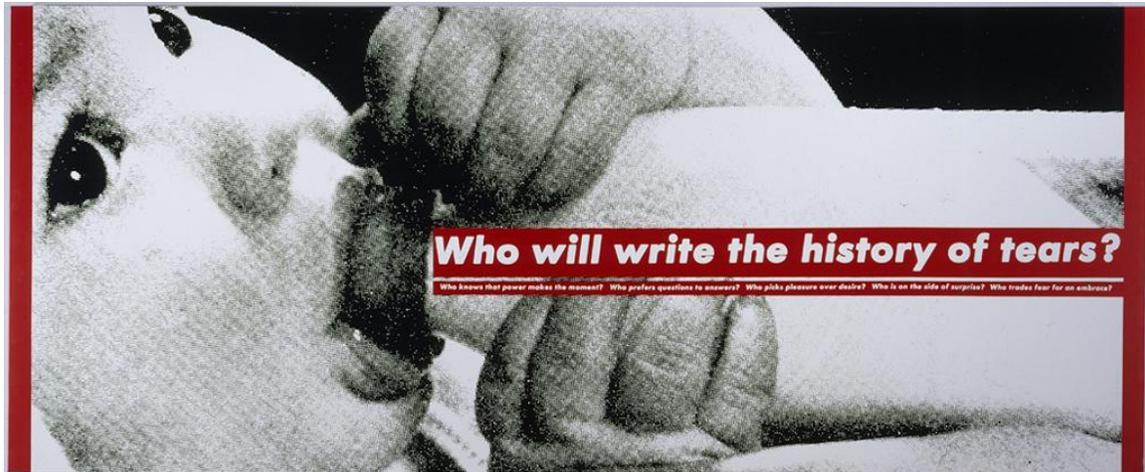


Fig. 6. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Who will write the history of tears?)*, 1991



Fig. 7. John Heartfield, *Das letzte Stück Brot, raubt ihnen der Kapitalismus, Kämpft für Euch und Eure Kinder!, Wählt Kommunisten!, Wählt Thälmann!* (*The last piece of bread, capitalism steals from them, Fight for yourself and your children! Vote for the communists!, Vote for Thälmann!*. 1918/1933)



Fig. 8. Alexander Rodchenko. *Lilya Brik*. 1924



Fig. 9. Franz Ferdinand, *You Could Have It So Much Better*, 2005.

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Presentation

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parody

signs/images the semiotics of parody

- Image
- Signification
- Language



Baudrillard & hyperreality

- Phases of detachment of the image from reality
- 1. image is reflection of reality
- 2. image masks and perverts a basic reality
- 3. image marks the absence of a basic reality
- 4. image bears no relation to reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum



simulation & deconstruction

- Simulation—imitation of something real

- Deconstruction—finding meanings through many interpretations

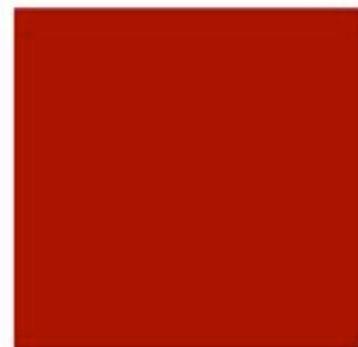


parody

- Parody takes a previous work and injects creativity
- Upsets the balance
- Form and content?
- Hidden meanings



the audience

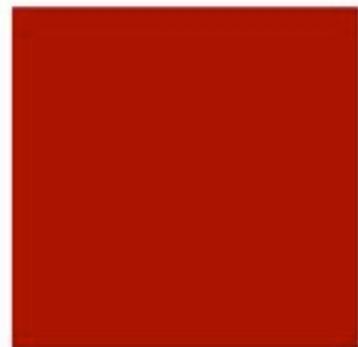


Yes, this means YOU.

parody & postmodernism

- Historical & political
- Questions
- Audience & discourse

- Given the similarities between parody and postmodernism (recontextualization, etc.) do you think all postmodern art is parody (or all parody postmodern) or not? Why?
- Are we living in a time where everything is parody?



Questions to ask yourself....

- On what parameters do we question originality?
- Is subjectivity stable or self-determining?
- Is identity, reality, truth, or history natural or artificial?

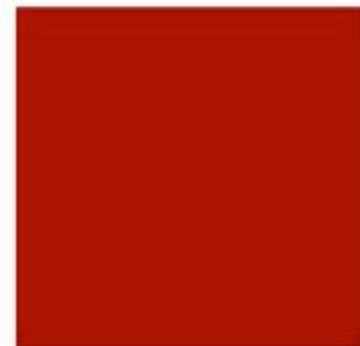


Examples of parody



Mel Brooks, *History of the World, Part I*

Examples of parody



Mel Brooks, *Spaceballs*