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To the very ground of meaning, to vary the ground of meaning

Abstract:
Parody may be understood as the absorption of a revolutionary impulse into the everyday production of meaning as continuous variation and soft subversion. Considered in this way, parody is transformative because it operates on the components within a system of meaning and/or the context, logic or spatial perspective that grounds the possibility of meaning. It is the conditions under which shared meaning, sense and sensation depend that I aim to unpack in order to suggest the ways in which parody can alter a person’s relationship to the world. Approaching parody as a mode of lived abstraction and an embodied approach to affective self-organisation, body-environment co-construction and a challenge to identity, it becomes possible to move from formal concerns to a set of transformative practices. Thus parody indicates where the anchors of embodied, embedded, extended, enacted and affective are dug in and hold identity and the ground of meaning in a steady state. This article examines how parody moves from the impulse to overthrow and invert – ‘Beneath the street, The beach’ – to a collective impulse that moves the ground of meaning into a reconfigurable process that is allows totalised systems of meaning to collide and intersect. What is left is not the rubble and ruins of meaning but revitalised fragments, stems cells of meaning ready-to-be-remade. A lineage of parodic works will be paraded and discussed that directly address the tacit relation of ground, horizon, orientation and position. This parody parade will form the basis of a critique and the analysis of the ontological orientations that for example, opposing systems of perspective insert as the very ground of meaning. The implication leads to the assertion that all descriptions of the world, universe and the cosmos are parodies in search of an origin.

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To the very ground of meaning

Parody has come a long way from being understood as an imitative and satirical reformulation. This paper will argue that today parody and its close relative, irony are transformative operations. In order to usher in of a new order of new meaningful consequences, parody treats original works as ready-mades, ready to be remade, revised or re-contextualised. While within a tradition or genre a specific work might act as an original site of meaning, the conditions by which these meanings come to have meaning are either tacitly accepted or blend imperceptibly into the background.

The ‘ground’ of meaning consists of the conditions that make meaning possible by forming a context and spatial frame of reference. This paper will unpack how a frame of reference operates through a discussion of systems of perspective and the ontological perspectives they exemplify. The assertion is that images of the origin and composition of space are themselves parodic works. The parody of a totalised image of space and its operating system (perspective) affects the relationship of human and non-humans to each other and the world.

The proposition is to examine how descriptions of the universe constrain the production of meaning. This is clearly a field of relationships ripe for parody. Particular attention will be paid to especially when the trajectory of parody, understood as a variation of an original form, morphs into the affects of lived abstraction. That is to say, parody can be considered an embodied practice of the forming of forms. This embodied practice operates in relation to the discursive forms as they are distributed and change over time as well as the way in which the self-organisation of the human, both as organism and as person inseparable from the surrounding environment experiences and acts upon the experience of forms and formal relationships. This is what is meant by lived abstraction—that ideas are experienced and as such, inflect the modes of persistence and change of which they are part. As a result, it matter is I believe the sun revolves around the earth or the earth around the sun, even if they look almost the same and especially if that particular totalised image determines how and where I look for answers.

An elegant way of intensifying William James’s radical empiricism and plugging philosophy back into lived experience is the term Technologies of Lived Abstraction coined by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning as the title of a book series at MIT. In their proposal for the series, they suggest that lived abstraction occurs by ‘performing one’s pre-determined positioning in such a way as to subvert it and open new possibilities. The theoretical privileging of performativity dovetails with the growing importance of interactivity in creative production’ (Massumi and Manning 2007).

The pre-Socratics, grouped together because these poet-philosophers understood the inseparability of idea and actuality, offering elemental models that were literal and metaphoric. To the pre-Socratics, the world as water, or as fire, etc., suggested that the best model of the world was the world. The inaccessibility of an absolute through any rationalisation of totality means that paradox confronts us at the foundation of existence. Perhaps as Heraclitus proposed, one cannot step into the same waters twice because the world is the fire of change and logos. Even more enigmatic is the
realisation of Heraclitus’s student who stated that one cannot step into the same waters even once, because the world is not even identical to itself.

This paradox sets up an unresolvable tension between form and process, diachronic and synchronic experiences of time and the notion of the one and the many. For Heraclitus’s student such a realisation left no further recourse but to remain silent. In Greek mythology Silenus, the teacher of Dionysus, knew the secret of life was that it were better never to have been born, and remained drunk and beside himself in order to endure the secret knowledge. His destiny was to live a parodic version of life, while his pupil Dionysus embraced and revelled in the aliveness of the existential quandary. If one cannot embrace the paradox of existence and the ground of meaning is swept away, then living is transformed into the Sisyphean task of repetition and difference, endlessly deploying the rules against themselves.

Parody has become a way to engage with paradox generating variation in order to find new modes of existence. In the latter part of the 20th century, parody took on a renewed resistance to absoluteness and aspirations to overthrow political resoluteness. Arthur Kroker describes Camus as an emblem of the possessed individual at the end of modernism: ‘the thinker who made of his own intellectuality and of his deeper subjectivity an experimental zone for abuse value, for introducing a great unsettling reversibility into the dialectic of reason’ (1992: 11). This great unsettling, which becomes visible at the end of modernism, develops into the serious play (Hutcheon 1985; 1992) in the second half of the 20th century. May ’68 might be seen as a parody of revolution. The absorption of revolution into a parodic expression is one of the first instances of a dispersed parodic impulse that replaces the constant modernist overturning of world orders. Before ’68 the battle over meaning in the western world still desires a unified front. After ’68, grandeur was on its last foothings and fragments of civilisation in ruins were no longer reminders of Arcadia but of things to be thrown back at the architects of society who were not in the panopticon tower. What is perhaps unique to the slogans of May ’68 such as (‘Beneath the street, the beach’ – written on the walls in Paris) is that the revolutionary rhetoric is coupled with literary construction and also rings of the new advertising and political sloganism that is to become the genre of the ‘sound bite’ in later decades. The ‘beach beneath the streets’ signals a new mode of resistance that wields the power of a Copernican revolution to the imagery of surrealism. The result is not just a critique; it is the transformation of the poetic violence of parody into a proliferation of networks.

Parody becomes generative when it can be understood as the absorption of a revolutionary impulse into the everyday production of meaning: when it becomes continuous variation and soft subversion. There is a tendency within parody (and irony) that resists as it engages, critiques as it produces and petitions through repetitions. This might be tracked through formal exchanges (within a defined domain of meaning production) to the soft subversions and molecular revolutions that are taken up as everyday practices. Parody absorbs revolutionary impulses and disperses them into everyday forms as continuous variation. If this proposition is taken seriously, then parody enters into the molecular scale of soft subversions, which Guattari suggests involve the disorganisation of physiological, biological and behavioural status quo in order to keep at bay the institutional and internal controls.