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Art as parodic practice

What the difference?

Already in rehearsal you can hear repetition and, in repetition, that insidious tilt towards ironic italics. As soon as another repeats your words there will be disjunction within the utterance. The slide from blank repetition to subversive mimicry, with or without intent, is, of course, a subtle one. As the French répétition recognises, repetition is rehearsal: what comes after produces precedence. Meaning is deferred through difference, as différence, Jacques Derrida argues of writing back in 1967 (Derrida 1967) – as Gilles Deleuze the following year is differently to elaborate of repetition (Deleuze 1968), whereby difference can be understood affirmatively, as differential. And so we turn, around the pivot of 1968, whose waves of student uprising and then mass protest will become, for detractors and supporters alike, a revolution that parodies revolution.

But difference through repetition marks the domain of our renewed questioning in this volume. Every utterance – be it diacritical mark, word, paint stroke or musical bar – every iteration of mode, or genre, means dialogue with previous iterations (Bakhtin 1986: 77). This runs the gamut of transformation from sampling, re-mash, pastiche, and travesty, through subversive laughter and extreme semiotic violence, right to revolutionary upheaval – stages through which parody spaces its becoming.

Where there are laws, injunctions, formal rules, there is also always, and implicit within the symbolic system, the ludic rehearsal of law breaking. Or is it so ludic? Proclaimed the Son of God in the Christian religion Jesus Christ is taken seriously insofar as he suffers parody. He is pronounced King of the Jews through a parody of Coronation: Christ is crowned by thorny derision. How far is that from Jean Genet, at once most religious and sacrilegious of writers, making of his Arab Nettle family in his The Screens (Genet 1967) his holy chosen ones, so chosen that in the end they are given no end; not even access to the Realm of the Dead? They will know no recuperation in representation. Nowhere is the sublime space in this parody of colonial violence-as-representation and the resistance it engenders. It is achieved through the tailwind of derision and nihilism that runs through its poetry – including the Legionnaires farting the Marseillaise – a riot triggering burst of iconoclasm that for a few days shut down the play.
Alongside the song

In the beginning was the word? Or was the word hosted by parody’s sheer, insistent materiality, finding substance in its double: the pun? In conception every symbolic act always and already breeds possibilities of its subversion or, more exactly – its alongside version. There’s logic in the spatial distinction: there has been no such subordination as implied in ‘sub’. Parody is alongside song: a spatial relation, which the German Beigesang repeats: not under what is sung, not sub, but alongside the serious ode. Parodia. It is what is spoken alongside, and catches there the other of the song. Giorgio Agamben (2007) returns for a re-envisioning of parody theory to Renaissance rhetorician Guilio Cesare Scaligero and quotes:

Just as satire is derived from tragedy and mime from comedy so does Parody derive from Rhapsody. Indeed, when the rhapsodes interrupted their recitation, performers entered who, out of playfulness, and to spur the souls of the listeners, inverted and overturned everything that had come before...For that reason these songs were called paroidous, because alongside and in addition to the serious argument, they inserted other, ridiculous things. Parody is therefore an inverted Rhapsody that transposes the sense into something ridiculous by changing the words. It is similar to Epiphrisma and parabasis (28-9).

Here Agamben’s analysis suggests the contemporaneity of the ancient Greek practice of parabasis in the satyr play, whereby, with the actors leaving the stage, the chorus leader steps forward to address the audience. Parabasis, accounting for the force of parodic interruption, opens a communicating vessel through which the spectators are addressed, and thus a human space, whereby briefly there is traffic between playwright and audience, alongside the space where the gods are invoked. And this seam – where parody is entailed alongside the divine – is, one might speculate, where humanity itself is always rehearsed and revised. In this spectator-address the chorus leader breaks the mimetic spell to make the contemporary moment speak alongside.

The short memory of postmodernity has marked endless origins for the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, often mistranslated as ‘alienation technique’, but it’s not hard to see its operations very much at work here in the spatial semiotics of the ancient theatre and to wonder whether it’s not intrinsic to all art. Alongside the formalist foreclosure on context, it was Mikhail Bakhtin (1981[c.1940]; 1970), of course, who insisted on social context, with Parody as its grotesque guardian spirit, its gargoyle, if you like. With him, social context is alive, red, raw and laughing disturbingly.

Perhaps because of the pervasive sampling, remixing, rehashing and promiscuous citational blending in postmodernity, where quote marks dissolve, parody has come to be seen as a somewhat archaic concept, pertaining to cultures more stably codified and hierarchically ordered, rather than subject to the fluctuations of global markets and phantasmagoric projections affecting the flow of investment moneys. Given the anxionic nature of postmodernity under its various guises, willed as hypermodernity and metamodernity or supermodernity, the ideologeme ‘parody’ might be seen as nostalgic symptom in the wake of the ‘grand narratives’ (Lyotard 1984 [1979]) – a rehearsed post-apocalyptic nostalgia for a world of neo-feudalism and fiefdoms, where
the seasonal lifting of prohibition for carnival brought on the ‘allowed fool’ (Shakespeare 2006) for parody’s brief upending of the hierarchical order, when high became low, mouth met anus, and wise became mad, even within the Pater Noster of the Holy Mass. (Bakhtin 1980: 78). How the revisitation of parody might illuminate contemporary cultural politics is a driving question behind this collection, a question made more urgent by recent global developments of terror.

Provocation

There was outrage and a sense of sickening déjà vu with the events of 7 February 2015 when cartoonists, editors, and friends of Charlie Hebdo were gunned down by ISIS-affiliated terrorists in Paris. The immediate aftermath was a massive global response in defence of the republican legacy of the French Revolution of 1789. Many defended Charlie Hebdo’s practice, including ‘obscene’ cartoons of Mahomet, in the name of free speech (Rouart 2015), in defence of parodic laughter, the right to lampoon pomposity, ideological certitude, and cultures of oppression, whether these be discursive, artistic or everyday practices sanctioned as custom. How might the parodic legacy of this trajectory – initiated in the French Revolution and transformed in the uprisings of May 1968 – be re-examined in the present climate of globalisation and terror?

Symbolically May 1968 takes us beyond the mere polemics and controversies it has spawned in historical, sociological, political, literary and artistic circles. Certainly these events gave rise to an efflorescence of innovative cultural theory and practice (Wark 2011; 2008; Ffrench 1995; Campbell 2014). In spite of the pervasive contemporary practices of culture-jamming, restaging, and adaptation that still resonate with these events, there has been little concerted work in recent years on the effective socio-political traction of contemporary modes of parodic repetition, whether these be deliberately provocative, playfully critical, or simply mimetic.

Background

For Linda Hutcheon (2006), parody constitutes the most serious form of productive variation and intertextuality or inter-art play. However, this emphasis underestimates the persistence of more blatant modes of parodic ridicule exemplified by Charlie Hebdo’s ‘Voltaireian’ (Rouard 2015) lampooning of religious ideologies. It is with these contradictory propensities of parody in mind that this collection intends to explore the cultural legacy of May 1968 exemplified by contemporary parodic practices in the arts. Given that few accounts of contemporary parody have significantly challenged postmodern formulations, and with the reminder of 7 January 2015 that parodic iconoclasm can provoke murderous reactions, it is no longer possible to treat this simply as a theoretical question of parody as apolitical play.

The potential radical force of art as disruptive renovation was theorised for modernity by Viktor Shklovsky’s 1917 ‘Art as Device’ [Shklovsky 2006], on which we graft this collection’s title. And, as mentioned above, of inestimable influence, alongside the serious Russian Formalist enterprise, is Bakhtin’s nuanced theory of parody working