

# **The claim of postmodern parody**

## **A reivindicação da paródia pós-moderna**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the presence of parody in contemporary literature and highlights the concept of postmodern parody proposed and developed by Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon, comparing it with other theories of parody.*

**Key words:** parody, postmodernism, postmodern parody.

### **Resumo**

*Este trabalho discute a presença da paródia na literatura contemporânea e enfoca o conceito de paródia pós-moderna proposto e desenvolvido pela crítica canadense Linda Hutcheon, comparando-o a outras teorias sobre a paródia.*

**Palavras-chave:** paródia, pós-modernismo, paródia pós-moderna.

Parody is an artistic mode that has been present in the arts for a long time. It has both been widely used by writers and thoroughly analyzed by critics. But although it is not a new phenomenon at all, it may deserve a closer look in order to reconsider both its nature and function as a return of parody has been identified by well-known critics such as Fredric Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, and Simon Dentith, who consider parody a trend in contemporary writing. This return of parody is not accidental for postmodernist literature relies heavily on parody and this claims for a return to parody itself.

Parodies have often been seen as “potentially transgressive authorship” (HOWARD, 1999, p.117), but postmodernist manifestations such as rap music have brought discussions on the nature and limits of parody to

the limelight as they rely on parodic principles and problematize traditional conceptions of authorship. For this reason, several critics have once more turned their eyes to parody. Linda Hutcheon is one of these contemporary critics and her main interest is the use of parody in contemporary literature. Hutcheon claims there have been changes in the nature and function of many of the parodies produced lately which justify a return to parody. In her studies, she proposes and develops the concept of postmodern parody, which is highlighted in this paper and compared with other views on parody.

Many periods of time could be also considered “The age of Parody”. From the sixteenth century, when parody had its heyday, to the nineteenth century, there were a great many parodies making use of canonical texts;

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however, although these parodies used these texts, they had a conservative function. Parody was predominantly used as a malicious vehicle of satire, having a secondary position when compared to satire.

This combination of satire and parody has been often used and has led to many misunderstandings concerning their natures and aims. Satire is as intentional as parody, but it holds an ameliorative intention (FRYE, 1970, p.224). It chooses a target of attack, which is evaluated negatively, and diminishes or derogates it by means of ridicule. However, although it holds this corrective intent, it does not show explicitly the ways to the correction of the vices it depicts. The satirist's main focus seems to be to change the reader's opinion on the subject and not the situation it portrays.

Parody also presupposes a target, but this target can be a work of art or a form of coded discourse; and this target becomes more than a mere target, for it is turned into a weapon. Hutcheon also reminds us that writer Vladimir Nabokov once stated that, "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game" (1985, p.78). This statement displays the active mode that characterizes parody, unlike satire. Despite this difference, Hutcheon defends that, "The interaction of parody and satire in modern art is pervasive" (1985, p.44). She exemplifies this point by providing examples of contemporary authors who write in English and make use of parody to satirize. Hutcheon mentions novelists Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, and Samuel Rusdie, who are all associated with postmodernism, but she fails to include novelist William Gaddis, who is a master in such use of parody. Gaddis provides us with a virulent satire of contemporary American culture, depicting its growing consumerism and commodification, which change the relation between works of art and their creators and works of art and their public. In his 1994 novel, *A Frolic of his Own*, Gaddis goes as far as to propose parody as the predominant mode for artistic production, as the novel itself is a parody of one his earlier works and its plot involves a charge of copyright infringement which is later dismissed as the work is shown to be a parody.

But even though parody was widespread in most eras, it was often seen in a negative way.

In Romanticism, when the cult of originality arose, it was rejected, for it was considered parasitic and, therefore, inferior. This is related to the growing capitalist ethics that emerged in modernity and which has also had effects on the literary production and on the reception and criticism on these works produced. This means to say that, gradually, literature was turned into a commodity and the consequences of this change in the way of looking at literature can be seen in our present life and are also brought by Hutcheon. It is assumed that the creation, establishment, and validation of copyright laws that happened during Romanticism, which culminated in the professionalization of writers, and the consequent appearance of defamation and copyright infringement suits against parodists, often taken for plagiarists, signaled these changes in the regime of authorship and in parody. Nowadays, this situation is changing as many parodies are considered derivative work and not plagiarism. Thomas Mallon explains that there are two kinds of appropriation "one that re-invents and rearranges and indeed often depends on the audience's recognition of the earlier material that has been transmuted" and another "that hopes, beyond all else, for the original material to remain unrecognized as such" (MALLON, 1991, p.242). Therefore, under this perspective, appropriation might be plagiarism or not. It is considered plagiarism when there is a transgression of the authorship of others (WOODMANSEE, 1994, p.1). And parody doubtlessly always involves some degree of appropriation and incorporation.

It is Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical production" that signals the existence of a new age, which Benjamin calls "the age of mechanical reproduction", and which would be modernity for him. But the changes noticed by Benjamin became widespread and indicated that modernity was starting to be replaced, in many instances, by postmodernity, although the term postmodernity had not been coined yet. In our western postindustrial society, which has been named in many different ways by intellectuals such as Lyotard (1992, p.17), who calls it the "postmodern condition", and Fredric Jameson,

who refers to “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (1998), parodies abound. But certainly, the parodies produced nowadays must be different from the ones produced in other literary periods and the main difference seems to be in the use of ridicule.

Hutcheon provides us with a brief history of the use of the term parody. She reminds us that parody is defined in most dictionaries as “ridiculing imitation” and most of the works of the vast literature dedicated to parody, analyzing its various manifestations in different times and places, make it clear that its meaning has somewhat changed. Nevertheless, they stick to the notion that parody is an opposition, a contrast between texts, in which the parodic text is put against the parodied one in order to mock it or make it ludicrous. Thus, “critical ridicule” remains the most commonly cited purpose of parody. However, as Dentith reminds us, the first known use of the term *parodia*, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, refers to a genre, a form of narrative poem, which is not necessarily humorous and subsequent Roman writers use the term to refer to the practices of quotation and allusion (2000, p.10).

When Hutcheon identifies the main characteristics of these parodies of today and coins the term “postmodern parody”, she argues that there is nothing in postmodern parody that supports the compulsory inclusion of a concept of ridicule (1985, p.25). Hutcheon seems to offer a return to the Aristotelian definition in her attempt to mark the difference between the parody used in contemporary fiction and in previous moments. For Hutcheon, postmodern parody depends upon the ironic rather than upon the comic, for she defends that for her parody would be repetition with critical difference, not necessarily involving ridicule. It would emphasize difference rather than similarity using irony as a rhetorical strategy. Alan Singer also disagrees with this view that parody should be aligned with ridicule, for he defends that parody relies on imitation and it is usually defined as “the appropriation of the voice of another twisted to new motives” (SINGER, 1993, p.83), which is a statement focusing on difference as well. Thus, both Hutcheon and Singer agree that the key words in parody are imitation and

transformation and in order to imitate and transform, the parodist goes back to texts and, in a way, returns to the past. Fredric Jameson refers to this an imprisonment in the past, which leads him to see postmodernism as being nostalgic about the past, which is not necessarily negative if we make use of Benjamin’s concept of nostalgia as something positive, as a look into the past with the aim of changing the present (1994).

Both Hutcheon and Singer also agree that postmodern parody would activate the past, either in theme or treatment through a new or ironic context. This is to say that parody belies the unity of experience it articulates by proliferating differences on a premise of identity (SINGER, 1993, p.82). This way, parody is converted into an important way for contemporary artists to come to terms with the past. It becomes obvious then that this concept of parody depends upon the reader who should have a certain degree of specialization since irony demands a sharing of codes for comprehension. The reader must be able to recognize the parodied text, and, in order to do so he or she must be a very well informed reader. The reader should have background readings as well as a cultural or literary memory so as to identify and decodify the texts superimposed.

If the whole of Hutcheon’s theory is analyzed, it is clear that what she proposes is a broadening of the concept of parody in order to cater for the needs of the art of the turn of the century. This would be certainly related to the different concepts of appropriation we have now, which would be, in their turn, related to the oppressive presence of the mass media and the modes of mechanical reproduction.

Affonso Romano Santana (1991, p.31) claims that what a parody does is to re-present what had been repressed, offering a new way to read the conventional. He uses an interesting image to illustrate his concept of parody. He sees parody as a lens that exaggerates the details in such a way that it can convert a part of the focused element into a dominant element, inverting it; this way, we have a part replacing the whole. In this image, the focus is once more repetition with a difference. Santana goes a little further claiming that the parodic text is like a rebel son who wants to deny its paternity and



wants autonomy from the parodied text. He complements this point of view by saying that parody would be an act of insubordination against the symbolic; it would be an attempt at killing the "father-text" in search for difference. His position is insightful; nevertheless, Hutcheon defends that the parodied text is not necessarily at all under attack, but under focus.

Hutcheon defends her approach by reinforcing that she is not the only author to put the emphasis on the repetition rather than on the ridicule. Deleuze (2002) had already defended that parody was for him a form of repetition that included difference. The emphasis would be on the act of appropriating a text, which would in itself question the concept of property and consequently authorship. This appropriation is characterized by the desacralization of the work of art, by means of the parodied text, and this, evidently, is related to what Walter Benjamin has called the "decline of the aura" of the work of art and the age of mechanical reproduction in which we have lived since the beginning of the industrial era, when the work of art lost its status of unique because it could be mechanically reproduced and this way anyone could have access to it. Appropriation would hold this relationship with our consumption society where all has been somehow commodified and objects have assumed the place of the subjects, replacing the subjects in the limelight. Hutcheon agrees with this point of view and includes this crisis in the entire notion of the subject as a coherent and continuous source of signification as one of the reasons that might have contributed to this turn to parody.

However, despite the importance of Hutcheon's theory, not every critic agrees with her. Margareth Rose is another contemporary critic that has been dealing with parody, as well as metafiction. Rose and Linda Hutcheon have kept an extensive dialogue on this theme by means of their publications. In *Parody: ancient, modern, and post-modern* (1993), Rose presents an extensive study on parody, but she does not share Hutcheon's ideas. Rose holds that parody cannot be divorced from comicality, and that the ultimate aim of parody is mockery. When comparing pastiche to parody, Rose states,

"...and even though pastiche has never necessarily involved humor as has parody" (1993, p.221), which clearly links parody and humor. Rose also brings the example of Fredric Jameson, as another author who sees parody as an imitation that mocks the original (1993, p.221). Nevertheless, Jameson defends that postmodernist authors no longer 'quote' texts, but they 'incorporate' them to a certain extent (1998, p.655), making the distance between the parodied text and the parody smaller. For Jameson, what Hutcheon calls postmodern parody would be pastiche or blank parody (DENTITH, 2000, p.194).

Rose claims that Hutcheon reduces parody to mere metafiction as some other theorists, which she calls "late modern". According to her, they reduce parody to comedy. For her, postmodern parody would be both comic and "double-coded". She fails to understand Hutcheon's proposition, which does not mean that parody and metafiction are terms with can be used interchangeably. The question relies on the purpose of a parody. Rose considers Joyce's *Ulysses* as a postmodern parody, for it is metafictional and comic. However, the predominance of a comic mode in *Ulysses* can be questioned. It is to be doubted whether Joyce had a comic intent or not. It is obviously intertextual and contains elements of comedy, but it is questionable if it can be considered comic, as she calls it. Despite its importance, Rose's theory does not sustain, for it has problematic areas. Firstly, she defends a rehabilitation of parody by means of a return to the first concepts used to attempt to define it, but she distances herself from Aristotle when she highlights the central role of mockery. Secondly, she uses *Ulysses* as an example of a parody, but although it might seem to be, it is not a postmodernist work.

Thus, the main issue regarding the study of postmodern parody seems to be related to the presence/absence of comic or mockery elements and to the role they perform in the literary work.

Terry Eagleton, when attempting to answer the question "What is literature?", in the introduction of *Literary Theory*, reminds us that a work of literature is a form of production and that we are aware now that the once



considered “raw materials” used in the making of a work of art are never really raw. The authors make use of language itself, previous texts, personal experiences or views, as well as many other elements, in the composition of their works and these elements are themselves already products. And these elements, as well as the readings made of them, are related to time. Eagleton also reminds us that we, either as readers or critics, “always interpret literary works, to some extent, in the light of our own concerns” (1993, p.13). This means to say that when a book is read it is “re-written”, consciously or unconsciously and when we say something about a book we are under influences similar to the ones the writer was, although as different subjects, we may react differently to them. These influences are related either to what he calls the power structure, or power relations, or to our unconscious. Thus, each period of time establishes what is literary and what is not as well as each new work incorporates, to a certain extent, new ways of “reading” the world and each period brings a different public to literature, that is, a different kind of reader. This may imply that parody might have changed and a new genre might have been created as Linda Hutcheon claims.

A return to parody demands a return to the etymology of *Parodia*, which as Genette reminds us, suggests that it is a chant (ode) sung beside or along (para), that is, in parallel, which might be a chant sung off key or in another voice, in counterpoint (1997, p.10). This summarizes the essence of a parody: a parallel and not less important voice which draws attention to other elements of a composition.

The essential in Hutcheon’s claim of the existence of a postmodern parody is that it draws attention to the fact that despite the different views on parody, it has been used by contemporary writers to establish a contact with the past. Hutcheon defends that there is a “postmodernist refocusing on historicity both formally (largely through parodic intertextuality) and thematically” (1988, p.16). This is in agreement with Dentith’s view when she contends that parody is “the mark of a gameful but productive relationship with the past” (2002, p.157). Thus, the claim of

postmodern parody seems to be that the past must be not only questioned, but also rethought and used in the light of our own concerns.

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