

“Soviet Semiotics of Culture: A Model for the Study of Literary Parodies”

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In an article titled "The Origin of parody," the Soviet critic Ol'ga Freidenberg defines parody as "imitation in which a sublime form is filled with a paltry content, ... an imitation of the lofty by means of the pitiful, disparity of content and form, mimicry, a translation from the tragic to the comic."

In tracing the origin of parody Freidenberg's examples illustrate parodic acts of religious rituals in the middle ages and identical phenomena in Greek and Roman antiquity, such as: mockery of religious feasts that coincided with Christmas, with feasts of the Virgin, and with Easter; mockery of the gods sacred hymns and ritual songs in the comedies of Aristophanes. In all these instances it was specifically the highest representatives of the church and secular authority that promoted this activity and participated in it eagerly. And then Freidenberg poses the following question: How is one to explain the presence in ritual of the parodic principle ... if its essence is comic mimicry of the lofty?

This paper addresses the question of the co-existence of these two opposing cultural facts; it identifies the fundamental features of the functioning of the mechanism of parody, and it suggests that various concepts of the Moscow-Tartu group as expressed in their works pertaining to semiotics of culture, may be fruitfully applied to the study of parody. The paper addresses some of the most important questions that I believe are relevant to the understanding of parody, such as: what are the requirements (cultural and textual) for the existence of parody? What limitations are expected, from or what limits are imposed upon the perceiver's familiarity with the text parodied and its activation in the perceiving process.

From the semiotic point of view, according to the Soviet critics, "culture may be regarded as a hierarchy of particular semiotic systems, as the sum of the texts and the set of functions correlated with them, or as a certain mechanism which generates these texts". Culture, then, consists of both static and dynamic elements. The static elements are comprised of the information that culture stores for transmission. The dynamic elements are those elements which comprise the mechanism which governs the semiotic structure of culture. There are two mutually opposed mechanisms at work in culture: The tendency toward diversity, and the tendency toward uniformity. At any one time one of these forces is the dominant one. Therefore, there are no eternal cultural codes or texts. The dominant force constantly accepts and rejects texts into culture. There is constant interplay between restrictions and transgressions. The shift of cultural boundaries leads to a condition where texts are either erased or destroyed, displaced into the areas of non-culture, or brought back into the system as information. As with myths, it is human history that rules the life and death of cultural language. Culture can only have an historical foundation; it is a type of speech chosen by history. (Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 110).

Culture, according to Lotman, can define itself only from the inside. Everything that it rejects it considers as non-culture or anti-culture. These are the external elements. But looking from the outside, these same elements may be part of another culture. Since culture is selective in its appropriation of elements, i.e., it does not accept every element in its field, its uniqueness can be defined only in relation to those elements that it rejects as taboo. There cannot be culture without non-culture and anti-culture. Or, to quote Ann Shukman, "'that which is', 'the given' is to be defined, or indeed can be cognized, only in its relationship to 'that which is not', 'the other'. This

principle binary relationship, according to Lotman, is one of the basic organizing mechanisms of any structure. (Lotman, 1977, 201)

In Lotman's view, "the space of culture is not uniformly organized. It always includes in itself some nuclear formations and a structural periphery... the degree of rigidity in the organization diminishes from center to periphery, and the center is always the natural subject for description." As is true with all cultural elements, the continuous alternation of nucleus and periphery is one of the mechanisms for structural dynamics. The nucleus is the field containing the most sacred objects of culture. It is the source for the language that culture uses to describe itself. It is also the field containing the cultural elements which parody attempts to destroy: the cosmogony of the culture, gods, rituals and rulers.

The parodic act can function both against sacred cultural texts as well as literary texts. In contemporary critical theory, the term parody is usually used to refer to a representation of a literary text or other artistic objects - i.e. a representation of a "modelled reality," which is itself already a particular representation of an original "reality." The parodic representations expose the model's conventions and lay bare its devices through the coexistence of the two codes in the same message. The term satire is used to describe critical representation of "non- modelled reality," i.e. of the real objects. The satirized original "reality" may include mores, attitudes, types, social structures, prejudices, and the like. It is important to note that by "non-modelled" reality we don't mean "non-structure" reality. Non-modelled reality is simply a cultural text that has not been or does not need to be coded in language.

We concur with Freidenberg that parody originated with the defamation of an original sacred "reality", the nucleus of the culture. The jump from cultural to textual parody must not have been too difficult to accomplish, since the earliest artistic texts in the Classical world and in the Middle Ages were themselves imitations of some cultural reality. I have in mind here early Greek tragedies and Medieval passion plays. They represent an abstract model of the given culture's religious reality. In reading these plays one gets the feeling that the culture simply let the anti-culture material invade the nucleus, and let it pretend to be culture for a short period. Anti-culture is the sphere of paganism in the Middle ages.

The perception, interpretation and function of culturally generated texts, such as religious rituals, change in the course of time in agreement with changes in the attitude of participants toward those texts. Therefore, the success or failure in the manipulation of a parody will be determined largely by the perceiver's attitude toward the text parodied, the cultural prototext. Although religious texts are usually associated with a specific non-aesthetic cultural activity, they are extremely adaptable into aesthetic texts because they share numerous structural properties. When a religious cultural text is used as a prototext in an aesthetic work, such as a parody or satire, two significant things take place: first, the text changes its function from the religious to the aesthetic, in which case aesthetic laws for production and interpretation come into action; second, there is a change in the perceiver's attitude toward the text, again from the religious to the aesthetic. Parody, then, is in the eye of the beholder.

During the early Middle Ages the Church was the center of cultural activities and a strong force in the shaping of worldly matters. Its attitude toward secular art was a reflection of its general negative attitude toward all things of 'this world'. No Christian was permitted, for example, to be an actor or actress, or to marry one; and if a professional actor sought baptism, he had to abandon his calling. Pagan festivals, rituals, and performances by professional entertainers were often

competing against church festivals for the attention of the general populace. It was not uncommon, for example, on Good Friday and Holy Saturday for the circus and the theatre to be filled to capacity, and the church be empty. The mixture of paganism and Christianity was at times reflected in the social rituals of some cultures. In Orthodox Serbia, for example, a Christian wedding ceremony was followed by pagan ritual celebrations from which the clergy was excluded. Priests were required to leave as soon as they blessed the dinner table and before the entertainers appeared, who represented various figures, males and females, performed lustful plays and bloody scenes with animals, and possibly even parodied the Christian wedding ceremony. Parody of the religious texts, then, involve a shift in the perception of cultural prototexts and attitudes from the sphere of religious culture to the sphere of aesthetic culture.

We find similar phenomena in the development of Classical Greek theatre: aesthetic imitation of fundamentally religious texts. Although the content of tragedy had strayed somewhat from the Dionysian myth, the narrative forms of tragedy retain clear traces of the original mystery of the Death and Re-birth of Dionysius. The perception of the religious text as an aesthetic text begins with the "weakening of strict belief in the truth of the mythological 'happening'" (Meletinskij 1977, 11). Gradually the myth detaches itself from the class of religious texts; it can no longer function as representation of the cultural cosmogony. Its existence as an aesthetic text is now governed by aesthetic principles. The ritual is no longer conducted in order to preserve the life of the culture but rather to provide aesthetic pleasure to its audience and participants. Its new relationship to society frees from its former obligations and permits it to assume new forms and express new ideas. As a result of this de-mythologizing, the religious text experiences greater freedom: new variations on the basic theme become possible; new plots and characters are included; and in extreme cases, such as in parody, the texts experience structural inversions. This, according to Bakhtin, "paved the way for as new literary and linguistic consciousness, as well as for the great Renaissance novel.

The true significance of the myth and the ritual was obscured in the Greek consciousness by the passage of time, long before the genesis of tragedy as a literary genre. This loss was inspired by cultural changes, and a new spirit of reason and inquiry. The ritualistic activity was geared more and more toward accentuating the aesthetic principles of the event, which in turn elicited specifically aesthetic interpretation. It is conceivable that in the Greek ritual an embellishing process parallel to that of troping in the Christian ritual developed. By the time of Sophocles the Dionysian festivals had lost most of their religious significance and drama had moved from the realm of religion to that of art.

The ritual ceremony in the Greek and Western Christian tradition could be transformed into a theatrical one once it broke off from the ritual life of the culture. This resulted in the abolition of all limitations and restrictions on the gestural and verbal performances of the ritual, and was followed by an emphasis on the development of the element of entertainment. Greater use of variations and invention was allowed, since the ceremonial was no longer bound by strict adherence to religious authenticity. One of the texts resulting from these transformations was the parody. Its primary intention was, and still is to excite laughter, the humor arising from gross incongruities. Historically, then, the first texts parodied were religious and mythological texts, sacred legends and noble characters, and the earliest form of parody were gestural: In the Christian tradition, these were the parodies of the liturgy. The negation of the structure evoked by parodic texts is accomplished through the reversal of the nature of gestures, plots and characters into their diametrically opposites. The fool becomes a king, the cultural anti-text

invades and pretends to be the nucleus of the culture. This type of reversal is possible only in instances where the culture has developed 'democratic' attitudes towards its sacred texts. The reversal is also perceived to be carnivalistic, in the sense that it is permitted to function only temporarily; therefore, culture is not threatened by it.

Perception of parody on the receiving end relies on the perceiver's ability to identify the text parodied, the prototext. The prototext always precedes the parody, or metatext. The perceiver activates the model of the prototext almost immediately, and all new information and structures are matched against it, which results in a text with two superimposed, diametrically opposite codes. Difficulties in perception arise particularly if the recipient of a parody is insufficiently familiar with the appropriate sociocultural sign systems of the culture that provided the prototext. A parody of a religious text can be perceived as such only by someone who is familiar with the cultural background of the text. The reception of the parody will also depend on the perceiver's ability to read the 'signals' in the text for the parodistic relationship between the prototext and the metatext. This is really less of an ability as such, but rather there is a necessity to adopt certain attitudes toward the prototext: one being that the prototext is not infallible, that the prototext may have 'another side'. In encoding a text parodically, producers must assume that the perceiver shares the same cultural and linguistic set of codes, and that he is familiar with the text parodied. The perceiver, then, is a co-creator of the parodic act.

Parody is a structural relation between two texts. In Bakhtin's terms, it is a form of textual dialogism between prototext and metatext. The dialogism can be initiated only when there is tension (cultural, structural or linguistic) between the two texts. Linguistic parody in modern times, according to Bakhtin, is non-productive "and its place in modern literature is insignificant, [because] we live, write and speak today in a world of free and democratized language; the complex and multi- leveled hierarchy of discourses, forms, images, styles that used to permeate the entire system of official language and linguistic consciousness was swept away by the linguistic revolutions of the Renaissance."

The parodic process involves a series of operations on a semiotic entity belonging to one system to generate another semiotic entity belonging to a different system (or encoded in another code). The encoder, and then the decoder, must effect a structural superimposition of texts that incorporates the old into the new. Parody superimposes the codes of anti-culture onto a cultural text. In doing so it lays bare the grammar of the cultural model and undercuts its significance. In this sense, parody has a destructive function. Perhaps for this reason parody is a genre that appears to flourish primarily in "democratically" culturally sophisticated societies. Note the recent reactions toward the film "Last Temptation of Christ", and Salman Rushdie's novel "The Satanic Verses". Foucault has also suggested a role for parodies of cultural texts in the transformation of the epistemes and discourse of an age.