Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Parody and Its Application to Postmodern Music

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Abstract

Parody—a particular case of intertextuality—is an important term for scientists interested in modern and postmodern art. Linda Hutcheon stated that 20th century parody, to be found in every kind of art, is a repetition with critical difference. It is composed of two structural levels, of which the first one is an authority, the second—a transgression of the authority. Its entire act of enunciation includes also a pragmatic frame, i.e. the intent of parody, which spreads from comedy through neutrality to seriousness. From the author's point of view, the compositions of Paweł Szymański (born in 1954) are interesting examples of musical parodies from the last decades. Among them are the second study from *Two Studies* for piano (1986) and *Through the Looking Glass…I* for chamber orchestra (1987). Both these pieces are two-level and algorithmic music. The parodied texts consist of basic determinants of the baroque style, such as regular semiquaver rhythm and tonal configurations, expressed either by melody or by harmony. The parodying texts, which we hear, are certain mixtures of baroque and contemporary elements. Besides motoric rhythm and tonal melody or harmony, there are post-tonal fragments, a new timbre, spaciousness, fragmentation, new kinds of articulation and schematic dynamics. Taking the issue of ethos into consideration, Szymański's parodies are serious, since baroque texts are treated as authorities.

Keywords: intertextuality; parody; Linda Hutcheon; musical parody; Paweł Szymański; two-level music.

Intertextuality, understood as defining specificity, function and characteristic features of a text by investigating its connections with other texts, is now used both in literature and in all the other areas of art. This is the reason why Ryszard Nycz (2005: 24–25), a Polish expert on literary theory, suggests that we talk about common intertextual poetics where a work of art, more often referred to as "an intertextual construct," is characterised not only by lack of autonomy, objectivity and unity, but also, or rather first and foremost, by contextuality of meaning, identity of narration type and certain extraterritoriality in relation to the principles governing cultural discourses.

Parody is one of intertextual artistic statements with a specific character which has been known for a long time and which over the past decades has garnered great interest among artists employing various media. Noticeably, this kind of artistic discourse has become a subject of a multitude of critical works, for example by Linda Hutcheon (1985), Margaret Rose (1993), Robert Phiddian (1997), Simon Dentith (2000), Michał Głowiński (2000a), Ryszard Nycz (2000) and others.

The most important works concerning parody include Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms* published in 1985. According to this Canadian academic, parody is one of the most popular art genres of the 20th century. The author gives examples from architecture, visual arts, literature, film, and also from music. Taking it for granted that there are no trans-historical definitions of parody, Hutcheon states: a contemporary parody is repetition with critical difference (1985: 32). Its entire act of enunciation includes two frames: structural and pragmatic.

From the structural point of view, parody is a bi-textual synthesis, which operates on two levels— "a primary, surface, or foreground; and a secondary, implied, or background one. … The final meaning of … parody rests on the recognition of superimposition of these two levels" (1985: 34). Changes of the background text could be either few or numerous, but independently of it one can tell that the deep level includes something known, and the surface level—transgression of it. Parody is therefore always a place of interaction between two texts or a group of canonical texts and the final text.

To talk in detail about the second, pragmatic frame of parody, Hutcheon introduces the term *ethos*. According to her, ethos "is an inferred intended reaction motivated by the text" (1985: 55). The act of inferring intent from the text implies two things: two agents, namely an encoder and a decoder as well as the community of codes for both agents. To read an inferred intent, a decoder has to look for overt signals. It is true that till the 20th century the ethos of parody had usually been to ridicule, but the ethos of contemporary parody should be labelled as unmarked, with a number of marking possibilities. Its range is broad and spreads from comedy through neutrality to seriousness. Hutcheon writes: "many parodies today do not ridicule the background texts but use them as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny" (1985: 57).

Hutcheon's theory of parody has already been discussed many times. Matei Calinescu sees some weak points in this theory and suggests we should make a better differentiation between parody and other forms of intertextuality, add to the definition a notion of playfulness and classify parodies according to their intensity and extension (1987). Polish critics and scholars accentuate mainly the strong points of this theory. Michał Głowiński, who in 1973 proposed the concept of "constructive parody" (2000a), paid tribute to Hutcheon's work in his later publications, seeing in it mainly the development of his own observations (2000b: 14–15). The conceptual work done by Głowiński and Hutcheon was given high prominence by Ryszard Nycz (2000: 208–209). The latter states that parody is characterised by as many as four functions: ludic, satirical, critical and constructive. In his explanation of the last function, Nycz writes:

> The constructive function of parody is a style-creating mechanism when it creates critical distance in relation to the repertoire of styles and allows for discovery of one's own stylistic idiom, as well as a genre-creating one when it leads to defining new genealogical rules as a result of critical transformation and reorganisation of petrified models. The construction of parodic form … also makes it possible to elaborate an original, dynamic and highly complex structure, which can be used to articulate new issues … and create one's own world of a work of art. (2000: 221)

According to Hutcheon and other authors writing on the subject, contemporary parody has achieved the value and popularity it never had before. As a musicologist, I am of the opinion that this interesting phenomenon should also be investigated in the field of music. The "parody" entry which can be found in the influential publication *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Sherr & Tilmouth 2001), at least in the part which covers the 20th century parody, is encumbered by some deficiencies and doubtful statements and certainly requires further work. I think that we could begin with adopting Hutcheon's perspective.[1] The next step should be to find typical musical parodies and divide them into three groups, namely parodies of individual compositions, of music styles and of music genres.

On the basis of Hutcheon's theory, I am going to present here two musical parodies by Polish composer Paweł Szymański, born in 1954. The composer does not use the word "parody" when speaking about his own music; however, some of his expressions can be regarded as very close to or even analogous to the term "parody" in Hutcheon's understanding. Here is, for example, a quotation which confirms that Szymański is an advocate of self-reflexiveness of all cultural forms:

> [They cannot be accepted,—V.K.] neither avant-garde optimism, nor conservatism. … What remains is meta-reflection, meta-creation, references to paradox, universalism which lets us take elements from different historical times, and from different geographical areas. (Szymański 2006)

The second quotation chosen reads like a confirmation that Szymański's aim is to create a doubled structures:

> One of the ideas which has occupied me for a greater part of my life is an attempt to create a doubled musical structure. … I believe that it is possible to create a structure whose transformations could be differentiated from the initial structure, that another text can emerge from beneath the actual text. (Szymański 2006)

The following lines show the composer's preoccupation with community of codes—between the encoder and the decoder:

> If it is naught but a speculation, it should be done in such a way that it is possible to experience during listening, to differentiate between what belongs to the primary structure and its transformation or what comes from the outside. In other words, it is necessary to give the listener a chance to guess what this subtext is. (Szymański 1986: 296–297)

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[1] In Polish musicology, Bachtin's point of view was introduced by Maria Piotrowska (1982) a few years before Hutcheon's, and it brought very interesting results.

According to Paweł Szymański, a doubled structure is an intended effect of his two-level technique. First level of a composition is called by him a basic structure and is always composed by himself in accordance with the rules of a chosen musical style, for example baroque, classic or renaissance. The second level is obtained through transformations of this basic structure.

Not all of Szymański's two-level compositions are parodies, and among his parodies not all are parodic to the same degree. From my point of view, the best examples are these works which are simultaneously two-level and algorithmic. One such work is the second study from *Two Studies* for piano from 1986 (Szymański 1987, 1997, 2006a).

Hearing the single-voice piece, a listener could have an impression that some of its sections are well known to them from the history of music (Chłopecki 1997: 7; Łabuś 2009: 31). It is possible to reconstruct the basic structure by discovering an algorithm governing the notes out of the score. From the reconstruction we learn that it is a variant of a baroque melody structure. It is composed in semiquavers, in B minor with a few modulations, which—from the harmonic point of view—is characterised by very conventional triad connections.

We can assume that after the basic structure had been created, Szymański made a deconstruction of it using an algorithm which can be presented in the following steps:

- a motif composed of 3 to 7 notes to be taken out of the basic structure, and to be added to a similar motif without last note;
- a 1-voice construction to be created taking in turn one note from each motif, from the shortest to the longest, until the last note of the shorter motif is followed by the last note of the longer motif;
- the last note of this fragment to be repeated;
- the next motif composed of 1 to 15 notes with each note repeated to be taken from the basic structure;
- return to the beginning of the algorithm and continue building up the monophonic texture until it has reached its intended length.

The transformed baroque melody is a single-voice construction in semiquavers without any time signature, composed of 77 cycles with every cycle containing one section of desynchronization of two similar motifs and one section of a motif with doubled notes. The characteristic feature of each cycle is post-tonality turning into minor tonality. The characteristic feature of the whole construction is the process of systematic extending of repetition sections, which are very close to the baroque melody.

To obtain a parodying text in a highly artistic form—the second study from *Two Studies* for piano—Szymański made some more transformations: he placed the construction of notes in the highest registers of piano, fixed the tempo *prestissimo,* introduced the articulation *poco marcato* for certain chosen notes and fixed the tuning in the ratio of 3:2, which can be replaced by *twelve-tone equal temperament.*

The next musical parody by Szymański I chose is *Through the Looking Glass… I* for chamber orchestra from 1987 (Szymański 2006b, FMPSz 2007). Hearing this work of art, a listener also has an impression of meeting some well-known music from the past. Having prepared a reconstruction of the basic structure, I can tell that the parodied text is composed of 1-, 2-, 3- and 4-note vertical arrangements typical for major-minor tonality, has a long melodic sequence at the beginning and is composed in D minor with a number of modulations. All the features indicate that the structure is characteristic for the baroque style.

To the basic structure unfolding in semiquavers, Szymański has applied a very easy algorithm, which I would like to present in three steps:

- vertical arrangements to be taken one after another from the basic structure and introduced into a new piece regularly, every fifth semiquaver;
- each of the vertical arrangements to be repeated 5 times at the distance of 4 semiquavers;
- continue the task until the construction has reached the intended length.

The result of the imposition of the algorithm upon the structure is the note construction in semiquavers in 4/4 time signature. The construction is composed of 52 sections, each of which comprises 16 vertical arrangements and their repetitions. The most characteristic feature of each section is that there are longer fragments, whose vertical arrangements move like in the basic structure, i.e. in major-minor tonality, and shorter fragments, whose vertical arrangements move with backward jumps, giving an impression of post-tonality.

In this piece Szymański made several further transformations, which changed this mechanical note construction into a work of art. The main task was to divide the whole construction into about 300 *ajour* fragments composed of 1 to 5 vertical arrangements and rests. The next was to join the types of *ajour* fragments with three different dynamic patterns. The *ajour* fragments were then assigned to two groups of instruments in such a way that percussion instruments play from the beginning of the work and gradually disappear, while melodic instruments enter one third of the way through thepiece and become more and more important in the course of the work.

As we could see, both Paweł Szymański's pieces—the second study from *Two Studies* for piano and *Through the Looking Glass…I* for chamber orchestra—were created by means of certain transformations of conventional structures. Underlying the compositions, the parodied texts are somehow limited, i.e. they consist only of basic determinants of the baroque style, such as strong regular rhythm and tonal configurations, expressed either by melody or by harmony. Such limitations were necessary due to the transformations which the texts were subjected to. The parodying texts, which are what we listen to, are particular mixtures of baroque and contemporary elements. Beside motoric rhythm and tonal melody or harmony, there are post-tonal fragments, new timbre, spaciousness, fragmentation, new kinds of articulation and schematic dynamics. It is necessary to emphasize that all transformations made over conventional structures are original and characteristic for our times. Considering the issue of ethos, Szymański's parodies ought to be regarded as serious, since

baroque texts are treated in them as authorities, i.e. as material which is not only perfectly suitable for deconstruction, but also valuable in itself. The title of the second composition—*Through the Looking Glass*—which, as we know, relates to Lewis Carroll's surrealistic book (2005), may imply that the composer's aim was to show us something valuable from the history of music, though in a different context.

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