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The carnivalesque, parody and irony in the contemporary american visual art: Project Womanhouse, a case study

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The present paper situates its concerns at the crossroads of Gender Studies, visual art and feminist theories in its attempt at investigating an (in)famous 1972 art installation by American artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, Project Womanhouse. Primarily grounded on contemporary theories of gender as a cultural construct, this study is concerned with how this particular instance of the contemporary American visual arts deals with the deconstruction and reconstruction of gender through parody and irony. The study also discusses the problematic viewpoint of feminism on gender as too narrow-sighted and restrictive, while opting for the term feminine to describe the gender-related statements of the artists under scrutiny.

Key-words: *irony, parody, gender stereotypes, visual culture, American visual arts.*

Introduction

The carnivalesque, parody and irony are similar in that they incorporate an interrogation of the norm, a revision of a prior reality, a transgression of the canon. As such, they have been successfully integrated in the subversive discourse of modernity, as devices which underline its ongoing questioning of fixed, immutable concepts and realities. Consecrated by literary theory, the carnivalesque, parody and irony have gradually infused all the discursive fields, being used today to describe and discuss a large number of cultural products.

Contemporary visual art makes no exception. As a discourse which is meant for the eye first, visual art has appropriated many of the narrative devices used in fiction in order to tell its compelling stories. Thus, irony and parody have become chief devices in the challenge that contemporary visual art launches against the authoritative stance of the artistic canon, against conventional representation and figurative art. Also, irony and parody are used to interrogate long-lasting cultural concepts which have, for decades, if not centuries, mystified reality. Among these, gender as a clutter of stereotypical attributes responsible for having decisively contributed to a history of uses and abuses upon the so-called weaker sex.

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Contemporary American visual art is very much keen on representing gender, as oppressive as representation itself is to gender, because just like race or ethnicity, gender is a visible marker of individual identity. Representing gender becomes a challenge to contemporary artists, because they have to exit the canonical framework and the traditionalist frame of mind and imagine new possibilities. In this context, the carnivalesque, irony and parody become gateways to a reconceptualization of gender in the context of modernity.

This paper is concerned with how these otherwise fictional devices can and have been used by visual artists to reconfigure the conceptual framework of gender and with how much this new framework represents a viable alternative to stereotype. Thus, the present study situates its concerns at an interdisciplinary crossroads, which is, I believe, indispensable in today's critical discourse, one which brings together feminist theories, gender studies and visual culture in an effort to understand how contemporary theory affects visual art and vice-versa.

1. The Carnivalesque

Drawing on Bakhtin's discussion of the carnival, the carnivalesque can be defined as a transgressive mood/mode which borrows extensively from carnival's ability to reverse hierarchies and whose function is to foreground a challenge of all norms and canons. Arthur Lindley observes in *Hyperion and the Hobbyhorse: Studies in Carnivalesque Subversion*, that 'carnival, for Bakhtin, is an embodiment of the liberated communality of the people in perennially renewed rebellion against the social and spiritual restrictions of the official order' (Lindley 1996: 17). Lindley insists on the anti-authoritative stance of the carnival as a social phenomenon, claiming that carnival is both 'an escape from and a critique of the static, oppressive hierarchy of class and economic relations' (Lindley 1996: 18). But what is utterly important to the present study lies in carnival's potential to reverse these hierarchies and create an apparently chaotic or disorderly world which only seems that way because social and political roles become inoperable. Consistently, Lindley notes that since traditional Western thought has reduced woman to the material and the contingent, relating her to nature and primitive practices, the logic of carnival 'celebrates the dominance of the feminine' (Lindley 1996: 18). Moreover, carnival obscenely emphasizes the bodily dimension in a similar celebration of what is natural and material at the expense of the rational and spiritual as iconic values of Western tradition. Carnival makes thus the connection with the primary sources of life, creating a flow of vital energy that temporarily liberates people from the artificial constraints of the social norms.

Contextualizing the discussion of carnival within the framework of feminine discourses, one acknowledges that, as an ideology, carnival perfectly suits the anti-authoritarian claims that these discourses launch. As Lindley pertinently notes, 'the history of carnival is that of its triumph over and suppression by the official culture,

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to which it stands as positive to negative, living to dead, relative to absolute, liberating to enslaving' (Lindley 1996: 18).

Envisaged as belonging to the low strata of culture, carnival performs a paradoxical operation by both insisting on this difference and at the same time erasing it through the temporary abolition of norms and canons. Its transgressive potential launches a subversion of the very concept of norm which is mocked at through laughter, the dominant of low culture (Irimia 1998: 18).

2. Irony and parody

Equally subversive, both parody and irony are seen as dialogic modes which launch a productive yet subversive dialogue with prior realities. Parody insists on the dialogue between past and present forcing an interrogation of the former by opening new texts; irony forces a subtler revision of the target-text by challenging its key-statements.

A large number of theorists have investigated the subversive mechanisms that ground the parodic revision. In the introduction to her study which concentrates on the theoretical aspects of parody, Linda Hutcheon claims that parody is strictly a formal phenomenon, but with far-reaching ideological consequences. She defines parody as 'a bitextual synthesis or a dialogic relation between texts' which 'both distances us and involves us as perceivers' (Hutcheon 1985: XIII). Hutcheon's analysis insists on the fundamentally dependent feature of parody, which cannot exist by itself and has to rely on other texts and other voices in order to perform its subversive operation. In this sense, parody manifests an intense intertextual feature.

It is interesting to note that Hutcheon identifies in parody a conciliatory strategy which is meant to establish a fruitful dialogue between past and present, between different texts rather than a counterproductive mechanism. However, Hutcheon overlooks the fact that through its marked subversive potential, parody does enter games of power. Parodic revision represents a repetition which preserves a certain critical distance but which 'marks difference rather than similarity' (Hutcheon 1985: 6). And marking the difference, as we have seen, implies most of the times a normative pattern and the idea of hierarchy against which difference can be stated.

As a fundamental component of parody, irony focuses on the conflict between two possible realities as it forces a subversive revision of a prior reality.

In *Irony* (2004), Claire Colebrook notices a painstaking difficulty in defining irony which stems from irony's intrinsic problematic nature. In this respect, Colebrook identifies the theoretical beginnings of the concept in Greek Antiquity, where *eironeia* referred to the artful deceit of double meaning both in a pejorative and a positive meaning. Irony started to refer to the practice of concealing one's true thoughts by uttering the exact opposite, making it the task of listeners or readers to identify and decode the ironic deceit.

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Colebrook thus underlines the marked dialogic nature of irony, which just like parody, points to another reality and to other texts. This dialogic feature is essential for the discussion of the ironic practice in the contemporary feminine discourse, as it overtly refers to their efforts of inscribing upon their discourses the significant difference. And difference can only be marked through dialogic comparison.

Moreover, irony also displays an essential dependency upon the idea of audience. The ironic practice can only become manifest as the result of a process of observation. Thus, the idea of an audience which would grasp the ironic intention is of paramount importance to the very practice in question. Irony's subversive potential depends entirely on the capacity of the audience to grasp and interpret the ironic utterance, which means that irony should be viewed as an extremely selective and elitist mechanism. Not only does it require an intelligent and trained audience, its detection also relies on factors that members of the audience have no control upon; understanding the larger context, making the right connections and exposing the ironic revision are all part of a very complicated and delicate mechanism which, if it fails, leaves the ironic intention unfulfilled.

Contextualizing this discussion within the framework of the contemporary feminine discourse, it is important to note that the carnivalesque, the parody and the irony have become feminine alternatives, due to their similar potential of interrogating and transgressing norms. As dependent on certain centres and norms that they initially foreground only to later challenge and subvert, they all reinforce a stimulating difference which opens rather than closes.

3. Project Womanhouse: A case study

Conceived and designed by Los Angeles-based artists and art professors Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, Project Womanhouse was intended to both represent the emerging ideology of the feminist movement in a blatantly visual manner and mock at the patriarchal institution and its stereotypical objectifications of women. In fact, the project focused on the representation of gender difference as the site of women's historical denigration by masculinist discourses. It is here, I believe, that Project Womanhouse failed as a manifesto. By focusing on the exact same reality that made the subject of patriarchy's disregard of women and of its imperialistic stance towards the feminine, Project Womanhouse lost sight of many other nuances that were to be artistically explored in the feminine experience, while reducing it to the ubiquitous gender difference. Where difference did not figure as diversity, but as opposition.

In practice, Project Womanhouse was conceived as a house-based installation, where each art student participating in the project was given a room to decorate while exploring various areas of the feminine experience. The result was a 17-room mansion featuring various artistic explorations of space meant to reflect the confines of the woman category. Project Womanhouse opened for one month in 1972 at the outskirts of Los Angeles, putting on display uncomfortable and, at times, shocking sites of womanhood. The focus falls on the female body as the site of women's

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experience, as well as the cause of her oppression. As a medium of culture, the female body is represented in a variety of ways, most of them falling under the semantics of the binary difference. It is here where the tyranny of representation becomes visible. Many contemporary theoreticians have debated upon the restrictive and exclusionary character of artistic representation. In terms of representing gender, debates have been even more intense. The image is bound to become a stereotype. Moreover, representation is seen as too limited to exhaust the infinite instances of being a woman. As Marysia Zalewski puts it, 'the infinite uncertainty of who or what woman is means that no matter how many representations of women are made, 'she' will never be filled up' (Zalewski 2000: 43).

Project Womanhouse foregrounds the female body in its functions rather than as a whole. The body is ironically dismembered and forced to represent through its biological functions. Thus, the Menstruation Bathroom, the Eggs to Breasts Kitchen, the Linen Closet are just a few of the compounding installations of the project which ironically reinforce an already existing paradigm of representation. However, as Sally Robinson argues, 'the fact that women remain subject to normative representations - of Woman, the feminine, the biologically female - reminds us that such representations continue to exert a great deal of pressure on any attempt to represent women as the subjects of feminism, or, indeed, as the subjects of any discourse or social practice' (Robinson 2000: 8).

Of course, the enterprise was considered shocking, offensive and courageous on a variety of levels. Semantically, it signaled the injustices that the patriarchal order forced upon female experience and the woman category. Visually, it displayed an artillery of counter-statements based on irony, parody and the carnivalesque, which were meant to mock at and dismember the logic of the patriarchal ideology. In this respect, the visual representation of gender difference becomes ambivalent. On the one hand it reinforces patriarchal statements, while on the other it attacks them through parody and irony. This means that, on the one hand, at the level of representation, the artists fail to exit the traditional gender binary, a major flaw of feminism in general, I would argue.

The Eggs to Breasts Kitchen, for instance, superposes three major symbol-images which patriarchal thought has used to describe the woman: the egg, as the sole signifier of female existence, the breasts, as the site of both motherhood and female eroticism and the kitchen, as the hearth of the house, the domestic space which best encompasses women's experience. The visual effect is compelling. Metaphor turns into parody, as the parodied stereotypes are still there, recognizable to all viewers, but their agglomeration within the same narrow space allows for parodic interpretation.

The Linen Closet is more subtle. It displays a full-sized naked female mannequin confined within the racks of a linen closet which hosts several neatly folded white towels. The woman is reduced to an inanimate body of plastic and set behind the closed doors of a coffin-like closet. In this case, the ironic stance forces the subversive revision of the normative representations of the female body in traditional Western culture. So does the Bridal Staircase, a chilling re-enactment of

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the traditional white wedding, with a mannequin featuring as the bride, in a frozen pose of conventional happiness.

The Menstruation Bathroom performs the daring move from irony to the carnivalesque, as it chooses to overtly emphasize, almost to grotesque proportions, the physiology of the female existence, by putting on display blood-stained intimate towels. The viewer's reaction is equally physical. By reducing the woman to the physical, the contingent, the transient, this particular installation challenges the consecrated representations of woman-as-Nature. Of course, this is one hard to digest visual reminder of women's private affairs, one which patriarchy has conveniently protected itself from through taboo.

Less direct, the Crocheted Environment opts for metaphor and irony to challenge women's confinement to the private, by putting on display a room decorated with spider-web-like crocheted pieces of cloth. The proximity of a traditional feminine pass-time to the semantic of the spider-web and the confines of a private space is again ironic. It exposes the traditional description of feminine experience as narrow and limiting.

In all these instances, the viewer is exposed to the ability of the human body to signify. One that Michel Foucault recovered from the essentially negative conceptual framework it had been exiled to and which he brought to the attention of the Western episteme. The female body has been historically represented as defective, ambiguous, transgressive. In the 20th century, Freud's theories defined it as lack. However, it is this very lack that has contributed to representing the female body as monstrous. It is held responsible for women's oppression in its defective aspect, but it also encloses the seeds of women's empowering in its aspect of mystery and horror.

Germaine Greer's 1970 *The Female Eunuch* represents a milestone in theorizing about gender representation, because Greer argues that representation is responsible for women's inferior status in the gender binary. As Project Womanhouse suggested, 'a woman's body is the battlefield where she fights for liberation; it is through her body that oppression works, reifying her, sexualizing her, victimizing her, disabling her; her physicality is a medium for others to work on (Greer 2000: 135).

Confinement seems to be the common denominator that the art installations put on display by Project Womanhouse in 1972 seem to attack. The confinement of the woman category as defined and described by the mainstream patriarchal discourses. Of course, following the success of the feminist movement in the United States of America, Project Womanhouse was an extremely courageous and innovative artistic enterprise. On a visual level, it took the liberty of overtly representing taboos which had previously never been exposed as such. On a semantic level, it straightforwardly attacked patriarchy and its representational stereotypes of femininity. However, just as feminism failed to propose a viable discourse which would accurately describe and represent the full extent of feminine experience, Project Womanhouse failed to offer something other than a shocking visual challenge of patriarchy. This can be viewed as the direct outcome of the

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project's failure to exit the constraints of binary difference, in this case, the male-female binary. Within the framework of such an ideology, there are no nuances, hierarchies are compulsory and polarized, discourses become inescapably political. Thus, both patriarchy and feminism come to paradoxically share the same frame of mind and the same ideological tools. As was the case of many other female artists, the authors of Project Womanhouse became trapped within the very same ideological apparatus that they were trying to bring down. Their sole innovation came at the level of visual representation.

Conclusion

Despite the immense potential of the subversive techniques presented at the beginning of this study, it seems that Project Womanhouse failed to exploit them at their full. The carnivalesque, parody and irony were well used at a visual level, where the stereotypical representations of the feminine are violently challenged and undermined through excessive representation, but they failed at an ideological level because they were contextualized within the same rigid framework that they are meant to contest.

Thus, Project Womanhouse succeeded only halfway. Visually, it pioneered the exposure of gender taboos in order to inaugurate a line of artistic representation which would explore new areas of the feminine. Ideologically, it remained stuck within the rigid confines of a binary logic where if one is not male, one must be female, if one is not white, one must be black, if one is not good, one must be evil, if one is not the master, one must be the slave, if one is not strong, one is certainly weak.

As women-artists elaborating on the feminine experience, the authors of Project Womanhouse produced instances of self-representation. They launched a discursive gesture which, with the help of parody, irony and the carnivalesque, was supposed to dismantle traditionalist representations of the female body and experience. In doing so, they tried to explore new forms of representation that would describe what being a woman was like from within.

Gender was exposed both as representation and performance.

The 'woman' put forward by Project Womanhouse is understandable and representable only when dismembered in its conventional biological and social functions. Only thus can she become acceptable. The role of irony and parody is to subvert the traditional representation. However, the irony is directed not only towards men and their imperialistic discourses, but also towards women who choose to define themselves according to these discourses. Femininity is seen as commodity, something which, far from being innate, can only be achieved through a great deal of effort and pain. It is also seen as a discursive construct, a cultural concept which has no correspondent in reality.

In many ways, Project Womanhouse is similar to writing autobiography. In this respect, what writer Jeanette Winterson states about fictionalizing autobiographies remains relevant at the level of visual expression. Thus, 'how each

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artist learns to translate autobiography into art is a problem that each artist solves for themselves (Winterson 1995: 106).

Project Womanhouse excessively represents the woman and her experience in a paradoxical attempt to do away with representational stereotypes. Excess becomes the visual statement of women's liberation from the constraints of stereotype. Unfortunately, at the ideological level, excessive representation is still representation and subject to its constraints.

En-gendering representation is a gesture which the authors of Project Womanhouse conceived as the only effective visual statement of womanhood. As an externally constructed artifice, 'the repeated stylization of the body' (Butler 1999: 43), gender becomes the locus where Project Womanhouse demythologizes the feminine experience. Nevertheless, en-gendering representation does not advocate for the rule of the Woman, on the contrary, it is a reaction against stereotypical representations of women by both women and men, a reaction made visible through irony, parody and the carnivalesque.

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