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**"Charles is an Angel of Goodness":
Parody as a Commodity Fetish**

Where anything goes, what is there to parody?
—Michael Newman

Writing in 1949 of the "delirious wallpaper [and] megalomaniacally scrolled iron beds" of Mack Sennett's movie sets, James Agee observed that "It was their business... to kid the squalid braggadocio which infested the domestic interiors of the period, and that was almost beyond parody."¹ The *idée reçue* lurking behind Agee's use of the word "almost," of course, is that a clear line always already exists between parody and the subjects of its discourses. This fractious "dance of otherness"² which classic forms of parody perform around the subject may be maintained even when, as in *Hamlet*, parody and subject are doubled for stunning dramatic effect. Thus Prince Hamlet sends up "the high style horror of the tragedy of blood"³ by pirating a line from the melodramatic *The True Tragedie of Richard III*: "Come; the creaking raven doth bellow for revenge." A few moments later, however, angrily soliloquizing about what the ghost will call his "almost blunted purpose," Hamlet falls unwittingly into the same hackneyed language himself: "Now could I drink hot blood." It is not Shakespeare but Hamlet who has lost parodic distance on the language he poked fun at earlier: the doubling is clearly ironic and is intended by the dramatist to give audiences

¹ James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," in Leslie Fiedler, ed., *The Art of the Essay* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1958), p. 375.

² This striking phrase was coined by Martin Gay. See his "The Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought," in Lisa Appignanesi, ed., *Postmodernism: JCA Documents* (London: Free Association Books, 1998), p. 61.

³ The phrase is Nigel Alexander's. See his discussion of Hamlet as unwitting self-parodist in *Poison, Play, and Duel: A Study in Hamlet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), pp. 114-115.

a privileged glimpse into Hamlet's divided consciousness, of which the Prince himself is acutely unaware.

In the decades since Agee published his critical appreciations of Mack Sennett and other artists in film, and especially recently, parody as a cross-disciplinary genre has come under increasingly sharp critical scrutiny. "In the case of Critical Super Realism and Neo-Geo," writes Paul Crowther of two postmodern schools of art, "we have works which engage us in terms of fundamental affective jolts—through thwarting or parodying expectations. . . ."⁴ In their typically apocalyptic vein, Arthur Kroker and David Cook describe what they call "the postmodern [cultural] scene" as awash in a "background radiation of parody, kitsch, and burnout."⁵ Like Crowther, but with less *fin de millenium* stridency than Kroker and Cook, Linda Hutcheon, writing in the mid-eighties, still sees parody as a discrete genre which "self-consciously and self-critically recognizes its own nature."⁶ Elsewhere Hutcheon shifts her focus somewhat, re-defining parody as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity."⁷ In fact, however, the key assumption underlying Hutcheon's phrase "the ironic signalling of difference" differs little from Agee, or from Crowther and Kroker and Cook for that matter. For all these critics, and from the broad classical perspective of the arts, parody clearly retains a certain apartness: the dancer is always different from the dance.

But what, we may ask, is the fate of parody in popular culture, or in what Robert Hughes calls "[the culture of] capitalism plus electronics"?⁸ What happens when parody's "signalling of difference" ceases to be heard as a popular discourse--when no one can tell the dancer from the dance? Taking my cue from Fredric Jameson and other commentators, I will argue that Agee's line between the "almost" and the "beyond" of parody is now being crossed on an everyday basis, parody itself having been transformed,

⁴ Paul Crowther, "Postmodernism in the Visual Arts: a question of ends," in Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: a Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 190.

⁵ Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Ecce Homo! Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1986), p. 8, qtd. in Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 222.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 27.

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, p. 26.

⁸ Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981), p. 324.

as we will see, into a full-fledged commodity fetish in media marketplaces, systematically brought not to self-recognition but self-erasure in the so-called American political economy of the sign.⁹

I

In the spring of 1990, a story entitled "For the Totos, a Hollywood Ending" appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. It detailed the bizarre saga of a married couple, Frances and Tony Toto, which was made into a movie:

In 1983, Frances Toto, a mother of four living in Allentown, Pa., and married to Tony Toto, a local pizza shop owner, decided to have her husband bumped off. It was an impulsive decision, Frances said later, but not a capricious one. Tony was cheating on her pretty much around the clock, and girls were starting to call the house. "A body can only take so much," Frances explained.

After failing in attempts to blow Tony up in his car and ambush him with a baseball bat (the bomb didn't go off and he chased the bat-wielding assailant away), she hired two amateur hit men, who for \$500 put a bullet in Tony's chest after Frances first subdued him by spiking his chicken soup with sleeping pills.

But Tony didn't die. He lay in bed unattended for four days with two bullets in him (another of his wife's friends tried to help by shooting him in the head), and he still didn't die.

"He was so full of life, you couldn't kill him," said Lawrence Kasdan, the film director, who has made an improbable new comedy, "I Love You to Death," based on Tony's and Frances's romantic troubles, now patched up since Tony recovered from his wounds and Frances was released from prison.¹⁰

Not the least improbable feature of the real-life murder attempt on Tony Toto was the stupidity of the hit men hired by Frances. As they stood over Tony's bed trying to figure out how to do the job right, they "recited the pledge of allegiance to each other . . . in an effort to remember on which side of the chest the heart is located. (The gunmen still got it wrong and shot him in the right side, missing his heart by an inch.)"¹¹

Frances and Tony Toto capitalized on their notoriety by traveling to Hollywood and promoting Kasdan's film. The film itself did not make fun

⁹ The term is Jean Baudrillard's. See his *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. C. Levin (St. Louis, Missouri: Telos Press, 1981).

¹⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 1990, Section E, p. 1, col. 2.

¹¹ *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 1990, Section E, p. 1, col. 2.

of the Totos. As a black comedy, it gave a straightforward account of their adventure. One could not describe *I Love You to Death* as a spoof or parody.

Thirty years before this ill-mannered comedy, in an important essay called "Writing American Fiction," Philip Roth retold, without parodic intent, the story of a double murder in Chicago and its aftermath:

... [A] song begins to catch on in Chicago, "The Benny Bedwell Blues." [Benny was the incarcerated killer of two sisters]. Another newspaper launches a weekly contest: "How Do You Think the Grimes Girls Were Murdered?" and a prize is given for the best answer (in the opinion of the judges). And now the money begins to flow; all over the city and the state. . . . Mrs. Grimes sets about refinishing and decorating her house. . . . Finally, the poor woman goes out and buys two parakeets; one parakeet she calls Babes, the other Patric [the names of her two murdered daughters]. At just about this point, Benny Bedwell . . . is extradited to Florida on the charge of having raped a twelve-year-old girl there. Shortly thereafter I left Chicago myself, and so far as I know, though Mrs. Grimes hasn't her two girls, she has a brand-new dishwasher and two small birds.

Roth's recapitulation of the murder case includes a bizarre meeting between Benny Bedwell's mother and Mrs. Grimes. Mrs. Bedwell says to Mrs. Grimes, "I never thought any body of mine would do a thing like that." Roth adds that when Benny Bedwell is released on bail, he is immediately offered at least two thousand dollars a week to sing in a Chicago night club.

Roth's "moral" is as applicable to the Totos as it is to Benny Bedwell:

And what is the moral of the story? Simply this: that the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture constantly tosses up figures daily that are the envy of any novelist.¹²

For Roth, the American writer is doomed to wander through a landscape wherein "parody finds itself without a vocation," in Fredric Jameson's memorable phrase. Parody has lost its meaning, Jameson suggests, because

that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such

¹² Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 119-120.

mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter. . . . Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blank eyeballs.¹³

Jameson links the disappearance of parody to the "disappearance of the individual subject"¹⁴ which has toolmarked most of the critical discourses of postmodernism from the beginning. To Jameson's way of thinking, and in the opinion of many other post-structuralist thinkers, the issue is rooted in *language*: if words are bereft of any sense of grounding in reality, then the language of parody, which is constituted of the same free-floating signifiers as the language of its subjects, becomes "blank": i.e., becomes privy to the charge of mere pastiche or replication.

A connection seems to exist, in other words, between the "You can have it all" ethic of media culture in the nineties, and the "disappearance of the subject[s]" of parody. "If everything is permitted," as Michael Newman puts it, "then it makes no difference what we do and nothing is worth anything."¹⁵ Thus the Totos' film biography was not a parody of their real-life adventures; it was an attack on the integrity--on the *possibility*--of parody itself. Its true message was that we have lost touch with the otherness of parody, lost the sense that any difference exists between a person, place, or thing (or an event) and its parodic *doppelgänger*.

On a wider scale, the ever-increasing American tolerance for the bizarre, for films and fictions where "everything is permitted," has effectively internalized the function of popular parody. By "internalized," I mean that parody's function, which once consisted of granting us a perspective *on* ourselves, has now been re-positioned *within* the reader or spectator. The effect of re-telling or re-playing narratives like the Bedwell or Totos' saga back to ourselves is not to give us perspective on these people and their deeds, but to systematically erase altogether the meaning of what constitutes perspective itself in popular culture.

In this sense, the Totos' erstwhile "frue" selves were indistinguishable from their screen selves, because the lure of capital erased any moral or esthetic outrage (distance) which a parody would claim as its rightful

¹³ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146, p. 65.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," p. 64.

¹⁵ Michael Newman, "Revising Modernism: Representing Postmodernism: Critical Discourse of the Visual Arts," in Lisa Appignanesi, ed., *Postmodernism: ICA Documents* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p. 141.

authority. In both the Bedwell and Totos' cases, parody would have begun by insisting that some sort of line be drawn between socially unacceptable behaviors and the decision to convert those behaviors into socially acceptable capital. I would argue that this line has essentially vanished from the thinking of many contemporary Americans, especially those born after, say, 1960.

II

The infinite confusion of values which underlies cultural epiphenomena like the selling of the Totos does not happen by accident or attrition. It is an inevitable by-product of an era in which television and other media expose everyone to bizarre events at such a dizzying pace that we have become anesthetized and inured to their strangeness. As Joshua Meyrowitz argues in his book *No Sense of Place: the Impact of Electronics Media on Social Behavior*, media blitz has long given rise to "synthesized behaviors" in persons:

If we celebrate our child's wedding in an isolated situation where it is the sole 'experience' of the day, then our joy may be unbounded. But when, on our way to the wedding, we hear over the car radio of a devastating earthquake, or the death of a popular entertainer, or the assassination of a political figure, we not only lose our ability to rejoice fully, but also our ability to mourn deeply.

In Meyrowitz's view, these overlappings of emotion, both "natural" and synthesized, also produce "new 'middle region' behaviors that, while containing elements of formerly distinct roles, are themselves new behavior patterns with new expectations and emotions."¹⁶

It is not unusual to see in the course of a single day's TV viewing, for instance, spectacles such as the following: the cooperative manufacture of a three hundred foot long sushi in Japan; a karate expert smashing boards with his head while being driven down a racetrack in a sulky; an Iowa farmer singing opera to his corn to help it grow; the Vice President of the United States informing the Samoan legislature that they will always be happy campers; a man pulling a Winnebago motor home uphill with his teeth; a teen-ager who can touch his ear with his tongue; a man who murdered his mother with a large porcelain snail telling all to Geraldo

Rivera; and so on. It is the concatenation of such events and situations, rather than their intrinsic weirdness, which makes obsolete the concept of self-parody. Consumed as a steady diet on TV, on radio, in newspapers and in tabloids, they help annihilate all traditional distinctions between parody and its subject matter.

This is why Linda Hutcheon seems to me mistaken when she argues that parody always "question[s] . . . the contemporary by 'referencing' it to a different set of codes."¹⁷ While she is correct in historicizing the function of parody in this way, parody is no longer virile enough to "reference the contemporary" to anything but its own set of codes: as Jameson puts it, parody and pastiche have now become one. It may be, as Hutcheon argues, that postmodern parody still enjoys a vocation as a sub-genre in painting; but even here, commodification has brought profound changes in the cultural status of art which cannot be dissociated from questions of pure esthetics.

We may better understand the cannibalization of parody by capital in media marketplaces, in fact, by observing a similar process in the art world over the last thirty years. In Robert Hughes' view, the monstrous rise in the prices of artworks around the world, not all of them masterpieces by any means, has done more than simply wreak economic chaos among middle-level investors. Inflation has affected the *meaning* of art:

Twenty-five years ago [i.e., in the fifties] one could spend time in a museum without even thinking of what the art might cost. The price was not relevant to the experience of the work. Price and value were completely distinct questions; the latter interesting, the former not.

Hard upon this age of innocence came the price deluge of the sixties, seventies and eighties. Now, according to Hughes,

[i]t would be naive to assume that [skyrocketing prices of Pollocks, Van Goghs, Picassos, etc.] do not affect the way people see art. The blind, gratuitous spectacle of surplus income displaying itself was being inexorably thrust into the meaning of art. Since price confirmed 'value,' there would no longer be conflict, or even tension, between heroic art--art that opposed to status quo, that stood for intransigent, unmediated consciousness, that embodied deep moments of dissent and insight, as Van Gogh's or Pollock's did--and socially acceptable art; the fetish of price fused both at a common level of spectacle and amenity.¹⁸

¹⁶ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 310-311.

¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms*, p. 110.

¹⁸ Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1982), pp. 383-384.

As the most socially acceptable value of all, it is capital, of course, the "fetish of price," which provides the catalyst for the fusion of esthetic distinctions in the postmodern marketplace. In like manner, the fusion of the value of parody with its ersatz subject matter has smoothed out all esthetic or moral distinctions between them. Indeed, Jameson might as well have chosen the word "product" instead of "pastiche" to describe the transformation of parody in the nineties.

III

How has this transformation taken place? Philip Roth speaks of the intrinsically bizarre nature of American reality, but I think it is wrong to simply focus, as he does, on any sort of externalized entity or actuality. After all, "things," as in Michael Newman's phrase, "All things are permitted," is a neutral term. It is we who construct culture and therefore permit things to be the way they are. In fact, parody's transformation has occurred in the postmodern era because the subjects of parody, like paintings, have become commodities to be consumed.

This consumption or internalization of parody occurs in three stages. First, all potential subjects of parody are converted into capital. Bob Hope, whose specials at this writing continue to appear in their fifth decade of network television, is probably television's best-known, if least skillful, parodist. Over the years, most of these specials have included at least one parody of a political or entertainment figure of current interest. Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, the central figure in the Iran-Contra Hearings of the late eighties, was featured in a show broadcast in 1989.

In Hope's spoof, North was portrayed testifying in a grotesquely ludicrous way before an equally ludicrous Senate. The intent of Hope's sketch was clearly not to entangle the audience in the putative rights or wrongs of the North affair. Indeed, by inviting his audience to guffaw at the sketch involving North, Hope's writers absolved the spoof, and in a sense North himself, of the very taints of controversy which parody feeds upon.

Moreover, by gently poking fun at North, Hope, whose right-wing politics closely parallel those of North, reinforced the Marine's status as a media hero, a product of TV, packaged not in paper or plastic but in laughter. "Even in mocking," Michael Newman suggests, "[postmodern] parody reinforces: in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions

onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence."¹⁹ Laughed at or lionized, in short, it hardly matters: in paying media attention to North, Hope's spoof "inscribed the mocked conventions onto itself," erasing any moral or ethical criticism of North as a broker of arms for hostages. Indeed, Hope's parody was itself a form of brokerage, a link in an infinite commodity chain designed principally to enable the selling of other commodities, the products of Texaco, for instance, Hope's long-time sponsor.

In the last few years a number of "bad boy" sports celebrities have appeared in a new kind of TV commercial. In these ads, the athletes are marketed as good-humored self-parodists who make fun of their own unsportsmanlike, tasteless, often vicious behavior on the court or playing field. Thus tennis star John McEnroe was seen "kidding himself" by reprising his temper tantrums on the court in order to sell Gillette products. In an ad for Miller Lite beer, the late Billy Martin and New York Yankee owner George Steinbrenner made light of their vulgar and well-documented disagreements in the media ("Billy, you're fired," Steinbrenner says as they both crack up). Most recently, 1992-93 NBA Most Valuable Player Charles Barkley was featured as an opera star in an ad for Nike footwear. In this segment, a decidedly postmodern *bricolage* of eclectic costumes, animation, quasi-operatic sound bites and sports iconography, Barkley is depicted as killing a referee, thus parodying his very real, occasionally ugly behavior on and off the court. Then, threatened with the loss of his Nikes, he dunks a basketball, shattering the backboard, upon which the chorus illogically exults, "Charles is an angel of goodness."

Here, too, an advertiser attempts to sell its product by pretending to parody the dark side of an athlete's image, which in Barkley's case includes spitting on a small girl at court-side, punching out a fan in a parking lot, and dumping a glass of beer over a woman's head in a Phoenix restaurant. This is, one might say, excessive behavior. As parody the ad featuring Barkley too is excessive. Indeed, it might serve as a template for parody's inability to "mock the conventional," in John Fiske's words, "to evade its ideological thrust, to turn its norms back on themselves."²⁰ In this case, the "ideological thrust" being parodied is the familiar boys-will-

¹⁹ Michael Newman, "Revising Modernism: Representing Postmodernism: Critical Discourses of the Visual Arts," p. 145.

²⁰ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 114.

be-boys syndrome in American sports. According to this venerable ethos, as long as athletes perform well, they can be forgiven their sins, at least up to a point.

The critical question persists, however: How does one turn a conventional norm back on itself when, in Jameson's idiom, parody merely functions as a thinly disguised pastiche--"a statue with blank eyeballs"? What is the ethical or moral difference between the norm and the parodic, between the excessive and the ordinary? Charles Barkley the basketball star is a commodity, like all professional athletes; Barkley the spokesman for Nike basketball shoes is a commodity too, selling his image along with the product. But which image is he selling to the public? Charles the bad boy or Charles the self-parodist? The answer is both, which means the "signalling of difference" or parodic line between the two has been effectively erased in favor of the bottom line of business.

Once this new brand of parody has been converted into product, the product, of course, must be consumed. This is the second stage of the process of internalization. It is at this critical stage that those "deep moments of dissent and insight" which oppositional art and parody demand of their audiences are lost or misplaced in the shuffle of marketing values. Thus Bob Hope's harmlessly comic Oliver North is invited into the viewers' living room, not as an object of mockery, but as a consumer item.

In the third stage of internalization, the product is disposed of. Disposal is as simple, of course, as putting down a newspaper, leaving a theater, turning off a TV set. What remains in the viewer's mind is the opposite of what a classic parody would have intended: not disturbance but quiescence, not enlightenment but erasure, not outrage but consumer satisfaction. As the success of TV docudramas of the nineties makes abundantly clear, Philip Roth's dictum in the sixties that American truth is stranger than fiction may itself be obsolete, "the very ontological status of the real itself," as Thomas Doeherty puts it, "[having] been called into question"²¹ in popular culture in recent decades. This was illustrated in the spring of 1993, when the doomed religious fanatic David Koresh attempted to negotiate a TV movie from his Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, while the FBI siege was still going on.

Thus parody's power to shock, the mocking gibes of the dance of otherness it once performed around its subject, have been bought and sold

and reinscribed as *part of the consumer*. When Kevin Eastman and Paul Laird created the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles a decade ago, they fully intended to spoof the "serious" martial arts films of the seventies. Indeed, Eastman and Laird registered surprise when the Turtles themselves became what they were originally intended to parody: an immensely popular consumer product. Now, in the mid-nineties, their faddishness has predictably begun to wane. Like other products--like the Bruce Lee films themselves--they may therefore be thrown away and forgotten. In this mass cannibalization of the value of parody it is disposal, as opposed to purchase, which becomes the ultimate form of conspicuous consumption.

²¹ Thomas Doeherty, "Introduction: Politics," in Thomas Doeherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 322.