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Reframing the popular: A new approach to parody

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ABSTRACT

The ubiquity of intertextuality in internet culture has ignited long-standing debates about the cultural significance of parody as a device of commentary and as civic speech. It also raises concerns about the legal implications of unprecedented uses of copyrighted material. This paper examines how YouTube videos, self-labeled by their creators as “parody”, reframe the meaning structures of copyrighted material. Focusing on representations of gender in the music industry, it probes 100 music video parodies through a qualitative textual analysis. The paper offers a typology of five interpretive configurations underscoring the relationships between originals and their renditions. While the majority of parodies did not convey the critical commentary that their label promised, most of them did aspire to transform the meaning of the music videos. The typology, which presents a discrepancy between textual and societal forms of critique, is discussed in relation to its contribution to broader evaluations of media audiences and user-generated-content.

1. Introduction

In the fall of 2013, Miley Cyrus’s transformation from a Disney teen-idol to an adult pop singer culminated in the release of a music video for her hit *Wrecking Ball*, which presented nude footage of her in tantalizing poses. As public debate ensued, the ultimate proof that the video hit a nerve was the vast parody treatment it elicited: over half a million remakes on YouTube.

Derived from the Greek *parodia*, “parody” literally means besides (*para*) the song (*oide*) (Hariman, 2008). The genre’s etymology is indicative of the long history behind parodic music. It also is suggestive of the genre’s ambiguous position as both a new text and a reflection upon the original (Erickson, 2013). Whereas parody has always been popular in art and media, in the past two decades its presence has exploded on the internet. Digital platforms overflow with tributes, memes, remixes, and parodies. Quotation and intertextuality have become so ubiquitous in digital vernacular, that they are often described as a central pillar of the internet’s cultural logic (e.g., Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013).

The ubiquity of parody stresses two distinct, albeit interconnected, debates about the genre’s role in broader social and economic structures. Cultural approaches, interested in the prospect that user-generated-content (henceforth UGC) offers an alternative to mainstream media, question if contemporary parody articulates critical commentary or indulgent playfulness. Legal approaches question whether the widespread use of copyrighted work on commercially-driven platforms is transformative enough to be protected under the fair use doctrine in USA law. This paper examines how YouTube videos, self-labeled by their creators as “parody”, alter the meaning structures of the original texts they reference. Drawing on frame alignment theory, I offer in this study an expanded vocabulary to analyze intertextuality by identifying the range of relationships between source material and textual responses to it.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I outline cultural and legal perspectives on parody and other forms of quotation, and present frame alignment theory as an alternative framework to approach the genre. Next, I describe the case study of music video

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remakes on YouTube. Focusing on current debates about the sexualization of female protagonists in music videos, I examine through a qualitative textual analysis, how 100 music video renditions reframed such imagery. The findings section outlines a typology of five interpretive configurations: frame abandonment, frame duplication, frame extension, thematic frame transformation, and meta-critical frame transformation. I discuss these configurations in light of the concepts of “critique” and “transformativeness” and suggest possible applications for the typology in studies of media reception and UGC.

2. Literature and media studies: parody’s critical potential

Parody is a particular type of *intertextuality*, namely a text’s reliance upon the meaning structures of other texts (Gray, 2006). Broadly defined as a form of imitation with critical distance (Hutcheon, 2000), parody provides commentary about the way a text or genre operates. It achieves this by combining duplication and distortion: the parodist replicates the most striking features of a work’s style and subject matter, thus turning an organic moment into something mechanical that can be scrutinized. Then, employing different strategies of alteration, it distorts the original and exposes its weaknesses (Hariman, 2008).

Parody is sometimes confused with satire. The difference is in their respective targets: satire aims its critical arrows towards social conventions whereas parody mocks aesthetic conventions. Nevertheless, parody often confronts social structures through aesthetic critique. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) described parody as a carnivalesque sphere wherein social norms are challenged. By calling out the mechanistic and cliché, he argued, parodies advance art and literature.

Parody is also distinguished from *pastiche*. Both concepts relate to practices of mimicry, but whereas parody seeks critical transformation, pastiche operates by similarity and reverence towards the work it renders (Hutcheon, 2000). The term pastiche has been historically associated with negative attributes such as literary forgery and lack of imagination (Rose, 1993). For example, Fredric Jameson (1990), disapproved the salience of pastiche in postmodern aesthetics and defined it as a “blank” parody. On the other hand, studies of fan fiction, fan art, and other forms of respectful imitation, suggest that fans are “ideal readers”, thus reclaiming a positive value for pastiche (e.g., Jenkins, 1992).

Literary debates about parody are animated by the tension between the genre’s potential to offer subversive critique of mainstream culture, and the varying degrees with which such potential is realized. This tension is also central in cultural approaches to media studies. Parody can offer poignant media criticism by ridiculing the media’s constructed image of the world (Hariman, 2008). On the other hand, it often mimics the media in a playful manner, devoid of critical aspirations. The ample use of parody within mainstream film (Harries, 2000) and television (Gray, 2006), highlights the polysemy of the genre, as it simultaneously expresses critique and complicity with the mainstream artifacts it renders.

With the explosion of intertextuality on the internet, the tension between parody as criticism and pastiche as mere quotation has been tied-in with debates about the degree to which participatory culture and UGC offer a sphere of cultural resistance (Jenkins et al., 2013). Studies that examine internet memes point to parodic, critical, uses of quotation (e.g., Milner, 2013), but also to quotation underlined by derivativeness and mainstream appeal (e.g., Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016).

Whether content creators exercise a critical or a playful role, the participatory culture framework often celebrates the agency that UGC platforms grant for amateur content producers. However, participatory culture also introduces a more fraught, intimidating, and potentially disempowering aspect. The act of media parodying and other forms of referencing typically involves the use and circulation of copyrighted work. As digital platforms make such uses accessible in unprecedented volumes, content creators who often have no or minimal legal training, need to navigate the highly complex and nuanced framework of copyright law.

3. Copyright law: parody and transformation

In the United States, protections for certain uses of copyrighted material were codified under article 107 of the 1976 Copyright Act. Also known as the fair use doctrine, this article outlines four factors to evaluate whether the use of copyrighted work is fair: (1) the purpose and character of the use (including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for non-profit educational purposes), (2) the nature of the copyrighted work, (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole; and (4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for the value of the copyrighted work.

The interpretation of this article has evolved over the years from a conservative to a more relaxed approach (Mendis & Kretschmer, 2013). Early rulings claimed that the fair use protection applied only to quotations that made a critical statement about the copyrighted material. In 1994, *Campbell V Acuff-Rose Inc.*, marked a turning point. In this landmark case, the Supreme Court ruled that a commercial musical remake of Roy Orbison’s “Oh Pretty Woman” by hip-hop group 2 Live Crew, fell within the domains of fair use. Despite being uncritical towards the original, judges deemed it sufficiently *transformative* – it added “something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression, meaning or message” (*Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music Inc.*, 510 U.S. 579).

In subsequent years, the evaluation of a new work’s transformative qualities has become a stable, central, often dispositive part of fair use analysis in court rulings (Aufderheide & Jaszi, 2010; Sites, 2015). Recently, New York’s Second Circuit court of appeals ruled in *Authors Guild, Inc. v. Google, Inc.* that Google’s making digital copies of books to provide search function is a transformative, and thus fair use, of copyright material. This ruling, (and the Supreme Court’s decision to decline to review the case any further), cemented the centrality of transformativeness as well as its analytic flexibility.

The criterion of transformativeness opens the stage for many uses of copyrighted material. A code of best practices developed by the Center for Media and Social Impact at American University (2008) details numerous possible applications of fair use in user generated videos. These include, but are not limited to, positive commentary (e.g. fan tributes), negative commentary or critique

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