

### Postmodern Pastiche: Following the Path of Productive Parody on Sesame Street

Critics of postmodernism may dismiss the theory as an overarching discourse serving as a showcase in the demise of high art, the inability to achieve truth, the death of the grand narrative, or the emptiness of parody. While I do not wish to engage in a discussion regarding the facets of postmodern theory itself, I will focus on addressing the issue of pastiche and parody specifically, as well as their context. This article seeks to explore parody that serves a purpose, which I refer to as *productive parody*, and in order to accomplish this I chose *Sesame Street* as the primary basis for my analysis. While *Sesame Street* functions overall as postmodern pastiche, there are certain segments of the show that serve implicitly as parody. Firstly, I will provide an overview of postmodern pastiche and how *Sesame Street* fits into that description, and secondly I will analyze specific segments of the show, both vintage and contemporary episodes, in order to illustrate how they function as a form of productive parody. Additionally, by analyzing contextual shifts within the educational platform of a televisual pastiche, we may be better able to assess exactly how productive parody functions, as well as its implications.

#### Pastiche and Parody

There are multiple ways that we can define parody and pastiche; therefore, I would like to begin by exploring the tension between the definitions that have been established by postmodern scholars thus far. Fredric Jameson has referred to pastiche, in the postmodern age, as an empty and meaningless replacement to parody without the presence of a "healthy linguistic normality" (17). Thus, parody no longer exists in postmodern culture precisely because we are unable to create new meaning, as language and subject have become both fragmented and schizoid (Powell 39). Since Jameson argues that we must have linguistic normality (i.e., modern language) in order to create parody, he provides us with a gloomy prospectus of our inability to derive new meaning from established works (at least in parodic form), while simultaneously indicating we no longer have a formal and healthy language structure.

Linda Hutcheon, on the other hand, provides us with a distinctly different perspective of postmodern pastiche and parody. She refers to "postmodern parody" specifically, generally objecting to the notion that parody and pastiche are one in the same or that parody has been

replaced with pastiche in the manner stated by Jameson. Hutcheon argues that, "postmodern parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations" (94). In other words, postmodern parody functions as a way to recontextualize the past and acknowledge how we are now separated from that past by confirming and subverting the power of representation in history (94-95). Additionally, Hutcheon argues that, "postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and powers of representation" (98).

Within this essay, the notion of pastiche and parody aligns itself more closely with Hutcheon's position; however, her definition does not provide us with sufficient information in order to properly address differences between the two terms and how they function within the context of an educational television series. I define pastiche as the adaptation, and subsequent mixture, of various styles that make reference to previously established works. That is, pastiche functions as a form of borrowing materials from a variety of different mediums and piecing these materials together to form a medley of various aesthetic styles and textual references. We complicate this definition further by placing it within the context of postmodernist theory. By confining pastiche and parody into postmodern culture (which I believe are inherently tied to one another in relation to our current socio-cultural condition), we are then able to illustrate a more robust, and applicable, form of pastiche.

For example, Dadaists employed multiple techniques in the creation of their art, including collage and photomontage, which can be said to be a form of pastiche. After all, Dada artists were creating works by (literally) piecing together different parts from different mediums, in order to create a brand new object. However, we cannot discuss Dadaist collage in terms of postmodern pastiche, as the Dada practice pre-dates postmodernity by decades. On the contrary, *Sesame Street* is an example of a postmodern pastiche, not simply because it was developed after the theory's establishment; but rather, in its use of distinctly different visual styles (e.g., animation and puppetry) that were originally employed to maintain the attention of pre-school children (Lesser 75-76). I point out this distinction in order to avoid confusion of the term pastiche, and to reiterate that I am discussing pastiche and parody in the context of the postmodern era.

While pastiche may be nothing more than a mishmash of styles and references that serve no particular purpose (as argued by Jameson), parody is generally accepted as an apparent imitation or critique of a previous work, often times creating new meaning. Jameson is less cynical in his discussion of parody, and describes "parody as a readily received idea," one that "found a fertile area in the idiosyncrasies of the modern and their inimitable styles" (16). For Jameson, parody was not "devoid of laughter" like pastiche, but served a purpose in imitating established works, even if it was simply for comedic effect (17). Hutcheon argues that parody, although imitative, differs, dramatizes and emphasizes the original text, by which irony acts as the "main rhetorical mechanism," in turn allowing us to become aware of these distinctions (31). She stresses that parody's main intent is not to copy, but to recontextualize and rework conventions, generally in a respectful manner. Additionally, Hutcheon makes the distinction that "parody is a bitextual synthesis, unlike more monotextual forms like pastiches that stress similarity rather than difference" (33).

I define parody as a critique, whether positive or negative, of an original work that is generally conceived via humorous and harmless imitation. While Jameson and Hutcheon offer distinct definitions by which both claim that pastiche and parody are different from one another (and I concur), ultimately, I believe that parody can be part of a postmodern pastiche, although this is not always the case. As aforementioned, *Sesame Street* serves as an example of postmodern pastiche as a whole, but certain segments within the show, such as *Monsterpiece Theatre*, operate expressly as parody. I will provide a more detailed analysis of several of the show's elements and would like to note that when referring to *Sesame Street*, I am not referring to any specific period of time since the show's inception in 1969; therefore, some of the parodic pieces and elements discussed herein may no longer be a part of the show's current lineup.

Finally, this brings me to the question: What is productive parody? Unlike blank parody, a productive parody serves a specific purpose functioning beyond mere visual flamboyance. An example of blank parody is Gwen Stefani's *Wind It Up* video. The music, along with the visual content clearly mimics the 1965 film *The Sound of Music*; however, the parodic elements do not add any further meaning to the song and serves no function besides visual flair. To contrast, productive parody is a tool used by *Sesame Street* to assist children in the process of learning, which is accomplished by recontextualizing established texts whose

original audience were adults (i.e., the play *Much Ado About Nothing*). Parody can alter the context in which the original content was re-created and subsequently interpreted, and this re-appropriation should serve a purpose, even if it is comedic relief.

### ***Sesame Street* as Postmodern Pastiche**

One of the qualities that made *Sesame Street* a pioneer in educational television was the role research played in designing the show. While part of the research was dedicated to creating specific lesson plans for each episode, part of it was also dedicated to the format in which these lessons would be shown to children. Precisely because *Sesame Street* was created to reach a wider audience via television, both researchers and producers, needed to make note of how this information would be presented. During the show's initial design stages, research indicated that limited attention spans of preschoolers would present a challenge. According to Gerald Lesser, one of the show's original chief advisors, *Sesame Street* championed this challenge by using "many short segments . . . and a variety of styles and techniques (mixing animation, puppets, live-action films, pixilation and any other visual devices the producers could invent)" (76). In order to help "sustain attention or retrieve it when it is lost," *Sesame Street* still combines fantasy and reality by mixing "four main ingredients: puppets; the cast of live adults and children on the set; animation and pixilation; and live action films" (Lesser 129).

Upon incorporating and mixing together these stylistic elements and technological advancements, *Sesame Street* came to function as a form of pastiche and subsequently redefined educational television. *Sesame Street* did not create the medium of television, nor did it create the various aesthetic styles it incorporated within the show. What *Sesame Street* did do however, was to change the content and context in which these various elements functioned. For example, *Sesame Street* did not create animation in and of itself, but re-appropriated its contents (to teach children the alphabet), and changed its context (to become part of the educational process). The show borrowed heavily from previously established technologies and styles, but it used these borrowed elements to produce a brand new format for children's television. By using the term "borrowed heavily" I am not in any way implying that *Sesame Street* directly imitated previous televisual styles; on the contrary, it used these styles to completely change the context in which they originally functioned.

I have spent many hours viewing various episodes of *Sesame Street* (both full length and highlights), online, via DVD sets, as well as episodes currently syndicated on the PBS channel. Throughout these viewings I noticed a number of changes to the show; however, its basic format continues to be comparable to what it was in its inception (they still use a similar pastiche of visual, aural and textual elements). While the show continuously updates its techniques and format in order to accommodate the newest generation of viewers and avoid becoming static, it is telling to observe how the show has not strayed unrecognizably far from the elements that made the show a success initially (Note: The DVD sets contain a disclaimer actually stating that vintage episodes are not suitable for the needs of today's children). Animation and musical scores alongside a mixture of live action and puppetry are still at the heart of *Sesame Street's* appeal, and most likely its success as well.

I find that *Sesame Street*, at its most basic level, functions as a postmodern pastiche, but more so in its use and formatting of the visual. The show was produced to be consumed by audiences solely through their television screens and in turn, the focus of the appropriation and quality of visuals used on the show would be inherently larger than other mediums. The show, as a whole, does not need to parody in order to be considered pastiche - an idea that Ingeborg Hoesterey refers to as *pastiche volontaire* (18). Additionally, Hoesterey states that, "pastiche structuration lends itself to exposing and rewriting cultural codifications that for centuries marginalized unconventional identities" (17). Although Hoesterey is speaking in the context of the art world, her ideas are applicable in supporting my argument regarding *Sesame Street* as a postmodern, televisual pastiche. *Sesame Street* has not only adapted previous formats and mediums and re-appropriated them for its own use, but it has also re-codified what educational television was and could be in the future.

#### **Context In/Out of *Sesame Street***

Although *Sesame Street's* producers did not wish to design a show to be strictly dependent upon adult participation, they knew that in order to attract the largest possible audience of preschoolers, the show also needed to appeal to adults, older siblings or both. The primary reason for this was simple: older members of the family were the ones who controlled the TV set. If *Sesame Street* failed to appeal, at least in some capacity, to this particular dynamic, their target audience may have been left behind, so to speak (Lesser 45). Additionally, the positive effects of parent/child co-viewing are well documented, which

provided yet another reason for producers to target a more mature audience. A parent who watches *Sesame Street* alongside his/her child, even without asking questions or interacting with the content, plays an important role in the child's learning process (Lesser 79-80).

However, even upon taking these aspects into consideration, *Sesame Street's* creators were adamant that "nothing is included in the program solely to attract this older audience and nothing is made to depend entirely upon their participation with the young child" (Lesser 120). Nonetheless, there is no denying that several elements within the show, most notably parody, are aimed at older family members. Guest celebrity appearances and parodies of well-known works are two main features still employed today that are specifically designed to appeal to a mature audience. In turn, the show not only provides us with a pastiche of different mediums and styles, it consequently creates a shift in context on a macro and micro level. On a macro level, *Sesame Street* has appropriated a number of established elements into the show, which highlights a major shift in context from its original use (e.g., children's education prior to television or animation that was primarily used for entertainment) to its current use (e.g., televisual pastiche for children's informal education). On a micro level, the best example of the re-contextualization of information is through the show's use of parody, which is doubly complex when dealing with an audience of preschoolers, as well as older family members.

I argue that the micro level shift in context, specifically, allows for parody to serve a purpose, which in the case of *Sesame Street*, is founded in the instruction of various literacies to preschool aged children (e.g., correctly reciting the alphabet, visually recognizing objects or successfully counting to the number 10). In the context of the show itself, parody serves a dual function: 1) It aims to attract older audience members into viewing the show, and 2) It changes the context of the original content, which was most likely designed for adult entertainment (e.g., *NYPD Blue*), into educational content, which is aimed at teaching children basic literacy skills (e.g., *ABCD Blue*). Consequently, many (if not all) *Sesame Street* parodies function as both entertainment for the mature audience and children, as well as an educational tool that can better prepare children for formal education. Following the path of productive parody on *Sesame Street* leads us to the multitude of educational segments that appeal to individuals of almost any age, and this is where I turn to next.

### Productive Parody on *Sesame Street*

In viewing numerous *Sesame Street* parody segments, I found that these parodies function in a number of different ways, including, but not limited to, teaching children to count, add, subtract, recite the alphabet, recognize body parts, and even be conscientious about their hygiene habits. These short video segments are content-driven and generally humorous and light-hearted in nature. While I do argue that *Sesame Street* provides us with great examples of productive parody, I cannot ignore the fact that the show is also meant to entertain; therefore, not all parody segments are productive in the sense of directly providing content meant to educate, but I have yet to find any aspect of these segments (or the show itself) that fails to entertain. Thus, even if a parody piece is not clearly indicative of having embedded a particular literacy lesson for children, its secondary function is to parody simply for entertainment purposes; though, examples of "entertainment only" parodies on *Sesame Street* are the exception and not the rule.

*Sesame Street's Monsterpiece Theater*, hosted by Cookie Monster as Alistair Cookie, is a parody of PBS' *Masterpiece Theatre*, whose original show host was British personality Alistair Cooke. *Monsterpiece* mimics the format of *Masterpiece Theater*, not only in its host persona, but also in its introduction and broadcast of a variety of classic works. *Sesame Street* uses the platform of *Monsterpiece Theater* as fertile ground by which to parody a number of classic and popular works in film, television, literature and theatre. Generally, each *Monsterpiece* segment begins with an introduction by Alistair Cookie, which is then followed by a parody sketch and subsequently ends with Cookie's closing remarks and possible mention regarding a future episode. *Monsterpiece Theater* is itself a parody of a classic British television series and the sketches shown within the segment are yet another parody, which in turn makes this popular *Sesame Street* segment function as a dual parody or a parody within a parody.

I viewed a total of fifteen *Monsterpiece* episodes that parodied four films, two television shows, three plays, four musicals and two books. There are many more episodes, but I will limit discussion to those that I viewed. Only two episodes (i.e., "Waiting for Elmo" and "Twin Beaks") out of the fifteen were primarily entertainment for adults, rather than education for children. Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* and David Lynch surrealist TV drama *Twin Peaks*, are somewhat difficult texts to comprehend and *Sesame Street's* parody of these works

are, what I would consider, clearly directed at a mature audience, particularly those who are familiar with the originals. "Waiting for Elmo" satirizes Beckett's play by illustrating its reputation for being incomprehensible, yet brilliant and "Twin Beaks," highlights the inherent duality and strangeness present in Lynch's cultic television show. Ironically, both of these works are the most inaccessible pieces that *Sesame Street* appears to have parodied, and this may be the reason why there is such a limited contextual shift from adult comprehension to child education.

The remaining thirteen episodes are not only comedic portrayals of beloved classics, but productive parodies as they directly address various literacy issues in hopes of educating preschoolers. *Sesame Street* can appeal to adults simply by parodying texts that are otherwise unfamiliar to children, as preschoolers do not yet possess the knowledge or ability to recognize a parody or understand its purpose. In turn, the shift in context is much more apparent in these episodes, functioning on two levels for the adult (i.e., parody and education), but only one level for the child (i.e., education). (Note: *Sesame Street* was part of my pre-school years, but it has only gained further appeal with me as an adult, as I now possess the proper skills and knowledge to fully understand the nuances and sheer genius of the show. The context in which *Sesame Street* resides has completely shifted in the last 25 years, yet the magic has not. I believe that parody is but one element of the show that successfully demonstrates a continuous slide in contextual understanding for education and entertainment purposes, as well as maintaining a strong hold on audiences of all ages.)

For ease of clarity, I have listed the thirteen *Monsterpiece Theater* episodes and briefly describe how each episode functions as productive parody. Each list is ordered with the name of the parody, name of original (if different), the medium (i.e., play, film, etc.) and description. I would also like to note that all of these episodes can be easily found with a quick Google or YouTube search:

1. "ABCD Blue"/*NYPD Blue* (television): An emergency police call leads two monsters to help those who forgot how to recite the alphabet.
2. "Anyone's Nose"/*Anything Goes* (musical): A female monster sings about how she learned to recognize and understand her nose.

3. "Conversations with My Father"/*Conversations with My Father* (play): A papa monster teaches his son how to conserve energy and water.
4. *Dr. No* (film): A doctor named No cures his patient by instructing him to recognize the word "no."
5. *Fiddler on the Roof* (musical): Russian peasants sing about addition, which helps them keep track of how many fiddlers are on the roof.
6. *Gone with the Wind* (book): In order to survive a terrible windstorm, two puppets try their hand at subtraction, in turn teaching children a basic math skill.
7. *Guys and Dolls* (musical): A male and female monster demonstrates that it is okay for boys to play with dolls and girls to play with trucks.
8. *Lethal Weapon 3* (film): Danny Glover and Mel Gibson guest star to introduce the dangerous number "3," which is then followed by number "4."
9. "Monsters with Dirty Faces"/*Angels with Dirty Faces* (film): A police monster is given the dangerous task to advise the dirty gangster monsters that they must wash their faces, in turn teaching children the importance of hygiene.
10. *Much Ado About Nothing* (play): A restaurant patron orders a hearty meal only to be told, ingredient by ingredient, that the restaurant is out of everything; in turn teaching the number "0" and the concept of "nothing."
11. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (book): Literal translation of the book title, where children are taught several numbers, including "1" that flies over the cuckoo's nest.
12. *The Sound of Music* (musical): A monster sits on top of a mountain waiting to hear the sound of music, but ends up illustrating other types of sounds such as a cow and ambulance siren.
13. "The 400 Blows"/*Les Quatre Cents Coups* (film): A monster celebrating his birthday takes 40 blows in order to blow out all of the birthday candles on the cake.

*Sesame Street* parodies are in no way tied only to *Monsterpiece Theatre*; in fact, there are a number of different types of stand-alone parodies on the show - some involve popular musical stars parodying their own song (e.g., Feist's *1234*), while others parody an artist (e.g., The Beatles), and there are even *Sesame Street* characters parodying each other (e.g., Oscar the Grouch reinvents a Kermit song). These parody segments are about three or so minutes in

length (a tiny portion of an hour-long show) and are incredibly effective in communicating informal learning skills, which speaks to the powerful nature of this type of narrative and visual tool for educational purposes. HBO's dark comedy, *Six Feet Under*, was parodied in a segment that featured Count Von Count counting six feet under a dinner table. Those familiar with the original show, such as myself, may be amused by *Sesame Street*'s innocent, yet effective use of the show's name to teach children how to count to the number six. Another example is Cookie Monster's *Share it Maybe*, which is a parody of the popular, and highly imitated, song *Call me Maybe*, and as the parody title indicates, the song conveys the message on the importance of sharing. There are far too many parodies on *Sesame Street* to be covered wholly herein, but I believe that these examples provide a solid foundation for analyzing productive parody on *Sesame Street*, as well as other children's television shows.

#### Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to explain and subsequently demonstrate two main concepts: how *Sesame Street* functions as postmodern pastiche, and how specific segments within the show serve as a form of productive parody. When I first began reviewing literature on postmodern pastiche and parody, as well as *Sesame Street*, I noticed a research gap that never tied these two ideas to one another. This struck me as odd, and it ultimately became the main impetus for delving deeper into postmodern theory and analyzing *Sesame Street* in the process. As I mentioned before, I am not an educational scholar and I cannot speak to the level of direct cause and effect in terms of *Sesame Street* and its efficacy in educating children. Even though that is not what I set out to address in this article, I am confident that most parody segments on the show serve a precise function in its goal to educate pre-school children on basic literacies, and in turn better preparing them for school.

Another important focal point lies within the contextual shifts, whether large or small, which are inherently present in every episode of *Sesame Street* and nearly all parody segments. After providing a closer analysis of the constant change in context within the show, we may now have the ability to better assess exactly how productive parody functions as a whole. As we have covered thus far, *Sesame Street* is a postmodern television pastiche, but this is not done without an underlying purpose that stems beyond entertainment. Parody, in and of itself, creates a contextual shift simply by moving from the original to the imitation, but when we link this shift with an attempt to entertain a mature audience and simultaneously

educate preschoolers, we encounter a multitude of educational segments that appeal to individuals of nearly any age. Although I believe this article to be concise in terms of addressing productive parody within the pastiche format of a children's television show, there is room for original research to combine educational scholars and childhood psychologists with visual arts scholars and postmodern theorists. A bit of imagination and creativity should take it from there.

University of Central Florida

Marci Mazzarotto

#### Works Cited

Fisch, Shalom M. *Children's Learning from Educational Television: Sesame Street and Beyond*.

Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2004. Print

Hoesterey, Ingeborg. "Postmodern Pastiche: A Critical Aesthetic." *The Centennial Review* 39.3 (1995): 493-510. Web. 16 Oct 2012.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.

Lesser, Gerald S. *Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street*. New York: Random House, 1974. Print

Powel, Jim. *Postmodernism for Beginners*. Danbury, CT: For Beginners LLC, 1998. Print  
*Sesame Street: Old School 1969-1974*, Volume 1. Sesame Workshop. Sony Wonder, 2006. DVD.

*Wind It Up*. Gwen Stefani. Online video. *YouTube*. Web 12 Oct 2012.

#### The Last of the Crass: Understanding the Shifting Values of Punk Subculture

In 1970, Ed Sanders of The Fugs coined the term "Punk Rock" (Shapiro 492). From this moment onward, Punk developed into one of the most iconic and influential subcultural movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It spawned a newfound political activism from youths and encouraged postmodern thought that challenged traditional values and it did so in an aggressive fashion never before seen. Eight years later, the band Crass released their song "Punk is Dead" effectively killing the scene while still in its adolescence (Crass). So, why is it that a culture such as Punk with such a significant following can dissolve so rapidly? The answer can be found within the philosophical shift of perception from youth subcultures. It is debatable the exact point at which Punk dissolved, but one can observe a clear change in the idealism of the 1970s subcultures and the mindset of the modern citizens of the post-2000 era (Burstein 3). In the 70s, "Punk gave the individual a route to personal liberation. Punk meant something more" (Berger 5). In 2000, "there is no Punk; just kids in black shirts" (Cabemach). What was once liberation became a fashion. Punk as a subculture dissolved because of society's inclination towards pragmatism. It became simply entertainment rather than a movement.

#### "You Can Be Who?": Defining Punk

'Punk' is a word that has always been notoriously difficult to define (Abebe). 'Punk' gained its subcultural connotation when musicians usurped the word to mock police dramas like *Kojak* and *Baretta* that used 'Punk' as an insult for the antagonists in the shows (LeBlanc 35). Youths started using the word 'Punk' to describe those who rejected authority and engaged in deviant behavior for the sake of promoting individual expression. 'Punk' therefore came to be defined as a militant expression of postmodern thought characterized by independence, alienation, and exaggeration (Eriksen).

Punk was created to be in direct opposition to not one clear issue, but rather in opposition to the overall authoritarian mentality of western culture (Eriksen). Everyone's opinions were to be valued in Punk culture as long as the idea was not the product of sole conformity and obedience. It was the duty of humankind to question reality and express doubt in its institutions. This Punk idealism sought to create a world in which members of a dominant culture would be encouraged to use individual moral reasoning for its beliefs. Therefore, Punk