



## Musical Parody at the Late 20<sup>th</sup> and Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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The concept of parody usually connotes a particular playful approach meant to produce a comic effect through ridiculing already existing artistic texts. While not excluding this interpretation, the new book by Claire Levy offers a broader perspective. Written in Bulgarian and accompanied by an extensive summary in English and informative photo illustrations, the book is concerned with parody as a playful, innovative approach in artistic practices and a creative reflection on conventions and cultural memory. Levy's well-informed critical discussion insists on the understanding that musical parody today not only employs ironic gestures to playfully reshuffle various ridiculing devices, but can also have positive references and innovating attitudes in terms of interpreting musical conventions. The affinity with parody's expressiveness in contemporary culture:

is seen as a sign of particular stylistic and value orientations of today's people, tempted not so much by the didacticism of one-sided artistic messages, but rather by the metaphorical potential of playful, roundabout, slippery, and multi-layered hidden meanings (12).

It is these other strata of inverted meaning that modify and re-signify established, conventionalized semantic structures, thus articulating the complex interpretative dynamics of artistic intention and public reception in a certain communicative process.

Building on some basic reflections on art parody developed by Hutcheon (1985), Levy goes further on to define the essence of musical parody by focusing on some key concepts, such as inversion, intertextuality, irony, and interpretative reading. An equally important category in terms of the referential nature of parody is seen in relation to dialogism in music, developed in a previous work by Levy (2005). In this sense, it is pointed out that parody rhetoric is "not simply a formal juxtaposition of structural elements from previous texts, but is always a set of internal and external circumstances that imply particular meanings within the context of a given communication process" (25). Parody, according to Levy, has also very much to do with playfulness, which pervades much of popular music and is one of its major typological characteristics, as "the ambivalence of playfulness reveals a subversive attitude which eliminates one-sided viewpoints of authoritarian positions" (58). This feature of parody is further examined in the book mostly in connection with some ironic gestures found in musical

performances of Bulgarian pop groups, such as Cuckoo Band, Upsurt (a play on the word 'absurd') and Rock Trio Milena, among others.

The author's arguments are grounded in a close analytical look at emblematic musical texts observed in the flexible areas of modern popular music, cinema, theatrical stage and musical video. The explorations here, based on particular case studies within both local and global contexts, point to artistic representations which outline functional aspects of contemporary parody: from animating codes of cultural memory to carnival rhetoric, from inverted melodrama to ironic approaches which innovate conventions of particular traditions and stimulate the emergence of entirely new genre developments in music. In this sense, insightful readings comment on the peculiar jokes observed, say, in the musical scene of Tarantino's movie *Pulp Fiction*, or in the theatrical staging of *Rhythm & Blues* by Bulgarian composer Roumen Conev, or in some of Madonna's music video representations. Parody rhetoric is also explored in provocative musical texts of some Bulgarian rock and hip hop bands (Control, Review and Upsurt, among others), whose messages reverse established musical, lyrical and cultural stereotypes in a topical, dead-on manner. Of particular interest is the analysis of a Cuckoo Band's piece, named "To Chicago ... and Back". Levy notes that the band has special merits in innovatively outlining notions concerning specific fusions between global Western and local Balkan ethnic sounds, as well as in developing the language of musical parody, especially while commenting in a humourous way on the newly introduced social and political myths in Bulgaria after 1989. Special attention is given to other emblematic fusion musicians like Teodosij Spassov, Yildiz Ibrahimova, Ivo Papazov, and the Gypsy Orchestra Karandila, who – because of their ironic, yet positive innovative gestures at otherwise well-established musical traditions – are recognised as significant figures who stimulated the emergence of an entirely new genre, ethnojazz. Levy elucidates stylistic approaches of such artists which open up new, locally coloured horizons for the cosmopolitan realm of contemporary jazz by modifying familiar texts into an interplay of seemingly incompatible musical universes.

It must be pointed out that throughout the book Levy contributes to various issues concerning contemporary philosophical and sociocultural thought. For instance, still in her introductory notes, she draws attention to the hot polemics in modern humanities, largely developed after postmodern thinking became a common way of interpreting parody forms in contemporary culture. The critical reflection here does not fail to note "the traps of the very concept of postmodernism as long as it is full of contradictions" (18). In this sense, Levy calls in question the grounds on which certain sweeping postmodern claims are made, especially considering the fact that postmodernism is seemingly supposed to challenge generalized views and encourage pluralism without necessarily seeking a universal aesthetic consensus. In addition, some aspects of modernity, globalism, ethnicity and what the author calls "a play of identities" (164) are viewed in light of their inherent problematics and placed in the conceptual framework of the presented thesis. In any case, the book questions the validity of any universal theoretical models and favours arguments for a subjective aesthetic "truth", i.e. a line of reasoning which is still not quite common among Bulgarian music scholars, but is certainly in line with advanced perspectives in Western humanitarian thought.

Worthy of note is that Levy maintains a sophisticated and yet accessible language, which familiarizes the reader with distinctive aspects of present-day sociocultural realia in both entertaining and insightful way. No doubt, it is a fascinating and thought-provoking read for anyone interested in the complex nature of contemporary popular music and culture.

### References

- Hutcheon, Linda (1985) *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. Methuen: New York and London: Methuen
- Levy, Claire (2005) *Dialogical Music: Blues, Popular Culture and the Myths of Modernity*. Sofia: Institute of Art Studies.