

THE DOUBLE EDGE OF IRONIC ARCHITECTURE

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

During the postmodern era, which took place between the middle to the late 20th Century, irony became the predominant mode of cultural expression. This growth in the frequency and intensity of irony in culture has been thought of as a response to the cultural crises of the latter half of the 20th century. According to architectural historian Charles Jencks, the peak of this crisis took place in the year 1972, specifically on July 15, at 3:32pm, when Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis Missouri was demolished. This was a turning point that marked the end of the Modernist architectural project and the beginning of the Postmodern movement in architecture. The vision of the architect as a "form-giver" who could access the spirit of the age and manifest it in an architecture that was universally true, rational, and social progressive was no longer tenable.

One of the ways architects faced this crisis was by adopting an ironic attitude characterized by skepticism, emotional distance, and a self consciousness towards the notion of progress and truth. Irony was applied in a variety of ways. Irony was used to make futility and uncertainty humorous, it was used in parody as a form of criticism, some attempted to form new ways of understanding architecture that were based on earlier philosophical traditions of irony. Architects such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Peter Eisenmann, Stanley Tigerman, Rem Koolhaas, Charles Moore and James Wines, were some of the well-known proponents of this ironic approach to architecture. Some of the features of postmodern ironic architecture are also present in architecture today, notably in the works of MVRDV, Bjarke Ingels Group, and FAT.

This thesis attempts to identify how and why irony is expressed in the architecture of the postmodern era and today by examining the rhetorical strategies and philosophies attributed to ironic expression. I argue that irony is an effective way to express uncertainty, to criticize ideas, and to propose provisional solutions. But irony is also problematic because it is inimical to common understanding, can easily lead to deception, and encourages emotional distance and ambivalence. However, these strengths and weakness are inevitable and necessary for ironic expression. I believe that irony is not inherently bad or good. Despite its attendant complications, irony possess unique semantic and pragmatic properties that enable it to effectively engage certain types of crises. This study of ironic architecture focuses on three aspects of irony: (1) The expression of ambiguous statements and multiple meanings through irony, (2) the use of irony in parody as mode of criticism, and (3) the use of ironic narratives to dramatize uncertainty and disorientation.

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INTRODUCTION

Postmodern Irony in Contemporary Culture

Whether it was in the parodic and self-aware writing style of postmodern metafiction, the glorification of mass culture and kitsch in Pop art, in the theories of poststructuralist linguistics and philosophy, or in the growing disenchantment many began to feel towards political and economic institutions, irony was central to many of the cultural developments of the postmodern movement which took place between the middle to late 20th century. In the weeks following the 9/11 attacks, many predicted an end to this “age of irony”. Roger Rosenblatt in *Time*, announced that “one good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony”¹, the editor of the *Vanity Fair* also pronounced the “end of the age of irony”². Even an editor of the satirical news network *The Onion*, Stephen Thompson was eager to part ways with irony, saying that, “None of us are feeling funny”.³

But defying expectations, irony persisted. In 2011, Michiko Kakutani notes in an essay in *The New York Times*, that “a lot of post-9/11 culture seems like a cut-and-paste version of pre-9/11 culture — or a more extreme version of it.”⁴In 2012, Christy Wampole writes an opinion piece in *The New York Times* titled “How to Live Without Irony”, chronicling how the “hipster” subculture came to embody the ironic attitude of the 2000s to early 2010s. The hipster consumes all that is niche without identifying with its countercultural ideology; Christian Lorezten of *Time Out New York*, describes hipster culture as a fetishization of the “fringe movements of the postwar era”, with its counter cultural forces “defanged, skinned and consumed”.⁵

¹ Robert Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” accessed October 29, 2019, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000893,00.html>.

² Michael Hirschorn, “The End of Irony - 9/11 Encyclopedia - September 11 10th Anniversary – NYMag - Nymag,” <https://www.facebook.com/NewYorkMag>, accessed October 29, 2019, <http://nymag.com/news/9-11/10th-anniversary/irony/>.

³ Rob Hiaasen and Lisa Pollak, “When Will It Feel Right to Feel Right Again,” accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2001-09-14-0109140108-story.html>.

⁴ Michiko Kakutani, “The 9/11 Decade: Artists Respond to Sept. 11,” accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/01/us/sept-11-reckoning/culture.html>.

⁵ Christian Lorezten, “Why the Hipster Must Die | Things to Do | Reviews, Guides, Things to Do, Film - Time Out New York,” accessed January 4, 2020, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/things-to-do/why-the-hipster-must-die>.

By 2016, the age of irony had entered a new phase: an era of “Post-Truth”, Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year, which was defined as a circumstance in which feelings shaped public beliefs more so than facts. That year, *The New York Times* wrote an article half jokingly titled “Is Everything Wrestling”, comparing the theatrical and openly dubious nature of politics to the staged-reality of the WWE.⁶ Then, in another turn of events, people began turning to irony as an antidote to irony. Studies show that satirical late-night news shows like comedian Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*, or Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, increasingly became people’s preferred source of news in a Post-Truth mediascape⁷⁸ and the increasing presence of comedians in traditional politics - like Beppe Grillo, Russel Brand, and the recently elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky – marked the emergence of what professor of politics Keil Milburn describes as a trending “post-ironic” style of populist political involvement defined by an attitude of ironic detachment.⁹ Whereas the irony of the 2000s was marked by the relatively harmless lamentations of Millennials against late-capitalist cultural ambivalence, by the late 2010s these feelings of disorientation and disenchantment had mobilized into a force that could shape global politics. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, it appears that irony is here to stay - at least for the near future.

How and Why Irony is Used in Architecture

Irony is thought to have emerged as a response to the cultural crises of the postmodern period. Marxist cultural theorist Frederic Jameson marked the year 1973 as what he calls the “rupture” or “break” that was the peak of the cultural uncertainty that would characterize the postmodern experience.¹⁰ 1973 was the year of events such as the 1973 Oil Crisis, the Watergate scandal, and the year of the Paris Peace Accords that marked the end of the

⁶ Jeremy Gordon, “Is Everything Wrestling?,” accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/27/magazine/is-everything-wrestling.html>.

⁷ Kirk Combe, “Stephen Colbert: Great Satirist, or Greatest Satirist Ever?,” *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015), accessed October 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048514568763>, <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/1748048514568763>.

⁸ Jeffrey Guhin, “Is Irony Good for America? The Threat of Nihilism, the Importance of Romance, and the Power of Cultural Forms,” *Cultural Sociology* 7, no. 1 (2013), accessed October 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975512453545>, <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/1749975512453545>.

⁹ Keir Milburn, “The Comedian as Populist Leader: Postironic Narratives in an Age of Cynical Irony,” *Leadership* 15, no. 2 (2019), accessed October 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018809750>, <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/1742715018809750>.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 3. print, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1992), 11.

Vietnam War.¹¹ According to architectural historian Charles Jencks, the year 1972, specifically July 15, at 3:32pm - when Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe house project in St. Louis Missouri was demolished - was such a turning point.¹² It marked the failure of the modernist vision of the architect as a "form-giver" who was uniquely privy to the spirit of the age and was able to manifest it in an architecture that was universally true, rational, and social progressive.

The crises of the postmodern period are described to be so profound, such that they could not be resolved by simply replacing the existing cultural narrative with a new one. Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard summarized postmodern thought as an "incredulity towards metanarratives"¹³, in other words, a resistance to all organizing principles that would typically be the very foundations of knowledge and the actions that arise from it. It is from a crisis of this nature that irony emerges as a response and why irony often takes on what would appear to be a counterintuitive form. For example, philosopher, author, and semiotician Umberto Eco in the postscript to his novel *The Name of the Rose*, writes that the "postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently."¹⁴; literary theorist Linda Hutcheon describes the *Poetics of Postmodernism* as a parody that ""uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges."¹⁵

Postmodern architects adopted such an attitude of irony, characterized by perpetual skepticism, emotional distance, and a self consciousness toward the notion of progress and truth. Irony was used to make humor out of uncertainty and futility, it was used parodically as an act of reference in order to criticize and subvert conventional knowledge, and some turned to older traditions of ironic thought to form a new system of beliefs that would be fit for a world where Modernist notions of progress, truth, and meaning no longer applied.

Architects such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Peter Eisenmann, Stanley Tigerman, Rem Koolhaas, Charles Moore and James Wines, were some of the well-known proponents of this ironic approach to architecture. Some of the features of postmodern ironic architecture are also present today, notably in the works of MVRDV, Bjarke Ingels Group,

¹¹ Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 62.

¹² Charles Jencks, *The Story of Post-Modernism*, 1. publ (Chichester: Wiley, 2011).

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge / Jean-François Lyotard; Translation from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; Foreword by Fredric Jameson* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹⁴ Jencks, *The story of post-modernism*.

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1988), 3.

and FAT. The work of these architects has often been described as “ironic”, but little has been said about what exactly makes them ironic and what ironic architecture is in the first place.

Irony as the Expression of Crisis

In light of the recent resurgence of irony in culture and the rise in the stakes associated with it, this thesis attempts to identify how and why irony is used in the architecture of the postmodern era and today. Irony can and has been used towards a variety of constructive ends. It can express uncertainty, criticize ideas, and propose provisional solutions. But irony is also problematic because it is inimical to common understanding, can easily lead to deception, and encourages emotional distance and ambivalence. Thus, it is difficult to say whether irony is “good” or “bad”. Irony is form of expression that is highly problematic but it is also those risks that enable it to convey meaning and express ideas that are otherwise not possible. Specifically, I argue irony carries high risk, but its unique semantic and pragmatic properties make it fit for engaging crisis.

Three Features of Irony

Each chapter of this thesis looks at one feature of ironic architecture. Every chapter consists of three elements: (a) a broad discussion of that feature, (b) a discussion of a text or a body of work that deals with said feature of irony, (c) an analysis of two to three relevant architectural case studies.

Chapter 1 discusses the concept of ambiguity in irony. Ironic statements are said to be ambiguous because they impart multiple potential readings – sometimes one is true, sometimes multiple are true, and sometimes none. Yet despite irony’s ambiguity, we somehow manage to understand irony time and again. For example, verbal irony is when someone says something but means something else. To understand verbal irony, one must be able to identify that the literal meaning of the statement is not the intended meaning and infer an additional implied meaning from the statement. This raises the question of how one understands ironic statements. How does someone recognize that a statement is ironic, and how does one discern amongst multiple potential readings of an ironic statement which one is true? And if irony is so ambiguous, why do people use it, and what does one gain or lose from saying something ironically? Chapter 1 answers such questions through a discussion of the concept of ironic ambiguity in Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and in the work of New Criticism.

Chapter 2 discusses how parody uses irony as a form of criticism. Parodic irony is an instance of ironic ambiguity – it says something but means something else – but specifically, it says utterances attributed to someone or something else, in order to disprove the veracity of those words and sometimes to disparage the speaker being imitated. Put simply, parody imitates in order to criticize. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon writes that parody “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges.”¹⁶ Recently, the media has been saturated with parodies that mock political figures. However, parody can criticize in many ways other than mockery. For example, in metafiction, literary tropes and conventions are amplified to show the typically hidden workings of fiction. Countercultural movements often parody mainstream culture in order to insert themselves into a body of discourse that does not allow for their expression. This chapter looks at the different ways parody is used as a form of criticism in architecture as well as the concept of Socratic Irony as a framework for how to use parody in a meaningful way.

Chapter 3 discuss ironic narratives. Although it may not be immediately apparent, literary genres like the picaresque novel, postmodern metafiction, or Greek Tragedy are stories of ironic situations. Just as parody shows that what something seems to be is not always what something is, ironic narratives form fictional worlds that highlight such discrepancies – between what is true and false, intent and outcome, appearance and reality. For example, tragic Irony - the use of irony in Greek Tragedy - is often based on the discrepancy between will and fate. This chapter looks at architecture that tells ironic narratives – alluding to ironic situations its inhabitants may find themselves in – and discusses the implications of identifying with ironic narratives through the lens of Richard Rorty’s concept of the ironic personality.¹⁷

Methodology: The Dual Function of Irony

Before continuing on to the first chapter, I would like to elaborate on how I have identified what I have called common “features” of irony, as well as through what framework I am evaluating the positive and negative effects of irony. My perspective on these matters is largely based on Linda Hutcheon’s concept of irony in *Irony’s Edge* (Figure 0.1). I found that amongst the various of ways of classifying irony, Hutcheon’s way most capably describes many types of irony, highlights their emotional affect, and provides a way of judging their pros and cons.

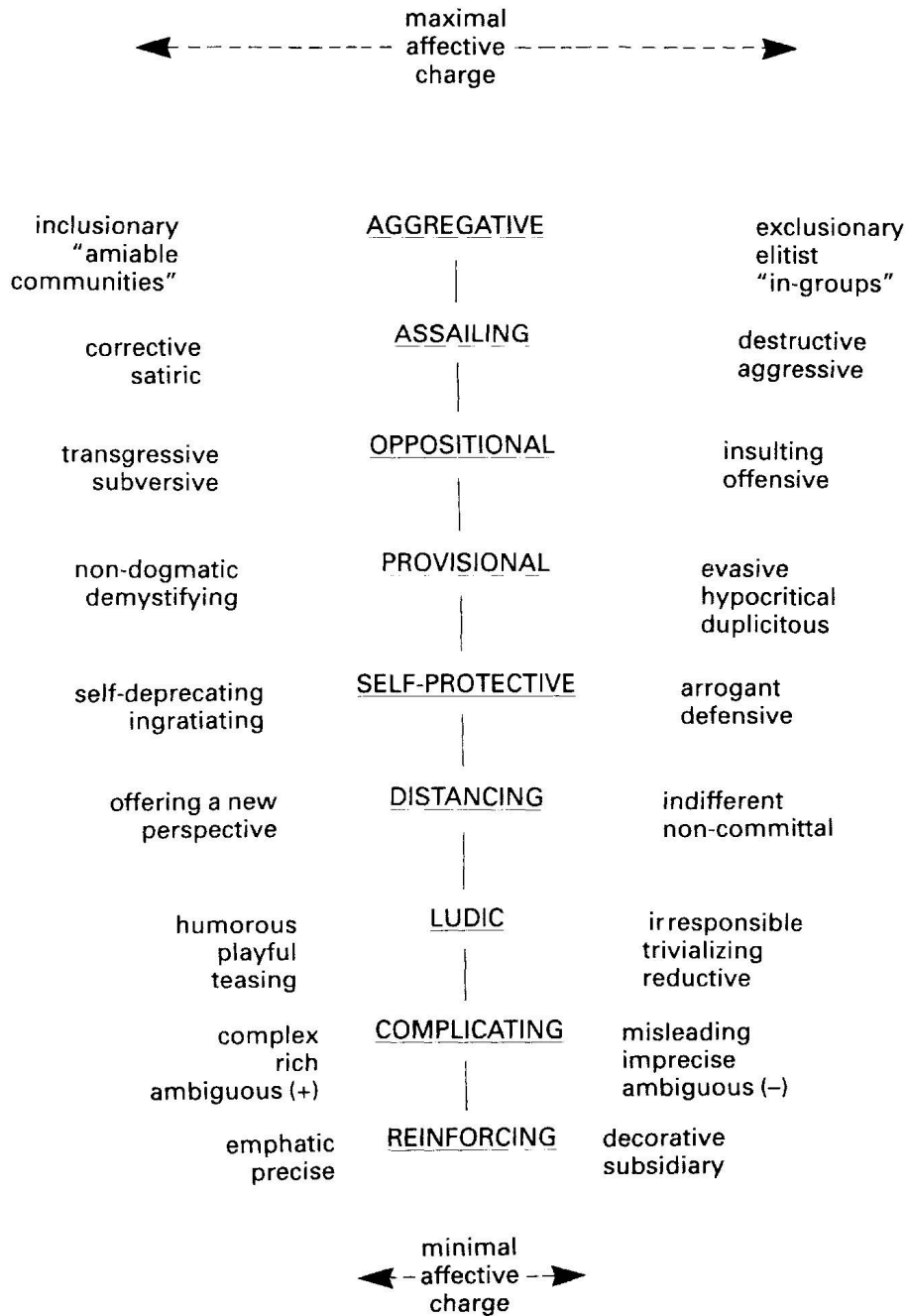
¹⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3

¹⁷ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3

Hutcheon's categorization of irony into various "functions", with "a positive and negative articulation", and an "affective charge".¹⁸Hutcheon ascribes three dimensions to ironic expression. First, is a function; each type of irony is used towards different ends. For example, "assailing" irony is used primarily to criticize - this category would include parody or satire. Secondly, Hutcheon also assigns a positive and a negative effect of each function of irony which function simultaneously. For example, an assailing irony like parody can criticize in order to correct something wrong, but it can also be purely "destructive" when used to express mock or derision without any desire to actually correct the subject of their contempt. This concept of irony as "dual functioning" is particularly important, as irony is typically understood as both a problem or a sign of cultural crisis, but also as a way to make sense of it. This concept of duality also gives a clearer framework for evaluating the moral stakes of any given type of irony, a way to weigh its positive effects against its negative effects. The third feature of irony is its "affective charge". This is a measure of what Hutcheon calls irony's "edge". Irony tends to leave people on edge – it causes confusion, disagreement, misunderstanding – an effect which can be seen in the negative articulation of each function of irony. However, not all functions of irony hold the same level of risk; in the diagram Hutcheon proposes a hierarchy that essentially orders these types of irony by risk level.

¹⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=95700>, 44.

Figure 0.1
 Diagram of the Functions of Irony by Linda Hutcheon, 1995.



CHAPTER 1: MEANING IN AMBIGUITY

Robert Venturi the Ironist

“Venturi is so consistently anti-heroic, compulsively qualifying his recommendations with an implied irony at every turn... Venturi shrugs his shoulders ruefully and moves on. It is this generation's answer to grandiose pretensions which have shown themselves in practice to be destructive or overblown.”¹⁹

Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture presented many of the ideas that would later be attributed to the ironic architecture of the postmodern movement. This chapter identifies the connection between irony and Venturi's concept of a complex and contradictory architecture, the formal and semantic qualities of a complex and contradictory architecture that express irony, and the implications of ironic architecture, conceived in this way, on the postmodern understanding of how architecture communicates meaning and the architect's ability to bring about social progress. Central to this discussion is the concept of “ambiguity” as it is understood in the field of linguistics as a feature of irony and understood in the field of philosophy as the relationship between appearance and truth. It could be said that one of the central features that make an architecture ironic is its expression of ambiguity.

This chapter examines three topics: (1) the connection between ambiguity and irony (2) how ambiguities are communicated in ironic architecture (3) how people “read” ambiguous architecture, and (4) the philosophical significance of ironic ambiguity in postmodern architecture, through a discussion of the New Critics' concept of ironic ambiguity as it is mentioned in Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.

¹⁹ Vincent Scully, introduction to, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed., Museum of Modern Art papers on architecture 1, Robert Venturi (New York: Museum of Modern Art in association with the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago; Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1996, 1977), 10.

Definitions and Concepts

Before continuing onto the main portion of this chapter, I would first like to define a few terms, elaborate on useful background information, and clarify some potential confusions:

Ironic Ambiguity

Ironic sentences are always ambiguous. For example, in verbal irony – which is often defined as “to say the opposite of what is meant” – two potential readings are available: the conventional meaning and the inferred meaning. Ambiguity comes in two forms. The first is, syntactic ambiguity which occurs when multiple potential readings correspond to a single sentence. For example, a “superfluous hair remover” could mean either “a hair remover that is superfluous” or “a remover of superfluous hair”. The second is pragmatic ambiguity which occurs when multiple speech acts correspond to a single sentence. In linguistics, a speech act is an action – an intention, purpose, or effect - associated with something said. For example, the sentence ‘the cops are coming’ exhibits pragmatic ambiguity, because it could be an assertion, a warning, or an expression of relief.²⁰

New Criticism

New Criticism was the predominant movement of literary criticism in America during the mid 20th Century. Members of the movement – such as T.S. Eliot, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, I.A Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and William Empson – departed from methods of literary criticism based in philology and literary history to a method based on Russian Formalism. The New Critics believed that figurative language in poetry was communicated through ambiguous statements, but it is Cleanth Brooks who specifically described this ambiguity as ironic.

New Criticism and Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture

Venturi mentions the New Critics for the first time in the third chapter of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, titled “Ambiguity”. Here, he introduces the New Critics’ concept of ambiguity in poetry, as well as the concept of ambiguity as a feature of art. Many of the ideas presented in *Complexity and Contradiction*, are an attempt to describe how ambiguity can be communicated in architecture. Many of the contemporaries of Venturi

²⁰ Adam Sennet, “Ambiguity,” accessed September 15, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ambiguity/>.

during the beginning of the postmodern movement were making similar sort of connections between architecture and linguistic concepts – for example, in George Baird and Charles Jencks' book *Meaning in Architecture*, Norberg Schulz's book *Intentions in Architecture*, or philosopher Umberto Eco's article *Function and Sign: Semiotics of Architecture*.

The Difference between Ambiguity and Ironic ambiguity

Not all ambiguous statements are ironic, but all ironic statements are ambiguous. The difference between ironic ambiguity and ambiguity is subtle, however, they are differentiated by their pragmatic qualities. Ambiguity is a more general term that describes any sentence that corresponds to multiple meanings, but in the context of irony, it is implied that ambiguity misdirects or hinders the comprehension of meaning. However, not everyone draws the same line between ambiguity and ironic ambiguity – this leads to much confusion. Venturi does not make the distinction. Literary critic Wayne Booth distinguishes between stable irony which is when “once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions.”²¹ and unstable irony which resists being interpreted a single way. When the New Critics and Venturi mention the term “ambiguity” or “ironic ambiguity” they are referring specifically to the ambiguity inherent in stable irony.

I. AMBIGUITY AS MULTIPLE MEANINGS

In Chapter 3 of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, titled “Ambiguity”, Venturi introduces the concept of ambiguity as a feature of art and literature. His examples of ambiguity include the visual “ambiguous dualities” of Optical Art, the “paradoxical content” of Pop Art, the “several levels of significance” in the Shakespearean play.²² Here, he also introduces the ideas of the New Critics like Cleanth Brooks, T.S. Eliot, and William Empson. The New Critics believed that ambiguous sentences that offer multiple readings but could be resolved into one single meaning – an instance of “stable irony” - created poetic language that otherwise could not be communicated with unambiguous sentences. For our purposes, I am using the terms ambiguity and ironic ambiguity interchangeably unless specified.

The concept of ambiguity in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* is mainly inspired by two literary critics of the New Criticism – William Empson and Cleanth Brooks. Brooks' work explains the philosophical implications of ironic ambiguity on language.

²¹ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 6.

²² Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 20.

Empson's work describes how ambiguous sentences communicate meaning, how the reader interprets that meaning, and the intended purpose of ambiguous communication. In this section, I will be discussing work of Empson, followed by its influence on Venturi's understanding of ambiguity in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.

William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguities

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson discusses different ways ambiguous language is used in poetry. Each chapter discusses a type of ambiguity, such as: "ambiguities that arise when a detail is effective in several ways at once", when "two or more alternative meanings are full resolved into one", or when two seemingly "unconnected meanings" attributed to "more than universe of discourse" or genre are presented.²³ Consider this example William Empson uses in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* – a passage from one of Shakespeare's Sonnets: "Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet bird sang"²⁴Empson points out that the poetic quality of this sentence does not derive from its literal meaning but is created through the use of ambiguous language. Multiple readings or disparate ideas are presented - initially they seem poetically unconvincing. However, as the reader contemplates the connection between these readings, deducing inferences in addition to the literal reading, the sentence reveals to be poetic. It easy to take for granted that these processes are taking place as one reads such a poem, however they become evident if we consider that a reader who is not privy to the multiple meanings behind the text would not be able to consolidate these multiple meanings into one.

"The fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatic structure is effect in several ways at once. To make a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling, in [the passage] but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood....because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystalized out of the likeness of a forest, and colored with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves"²⁵

Here, Empson reveals *how* ambiguity is successfully interpreted and *what* meaning is communicated through ambiguous statements. In the field of pragmatics, these same concerns are addressed in various models of irony. Professor of Language and

²³ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi 67 (Torino: Einaudi, 1985), 10.

²⁴ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2.

²⁵ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2-4.

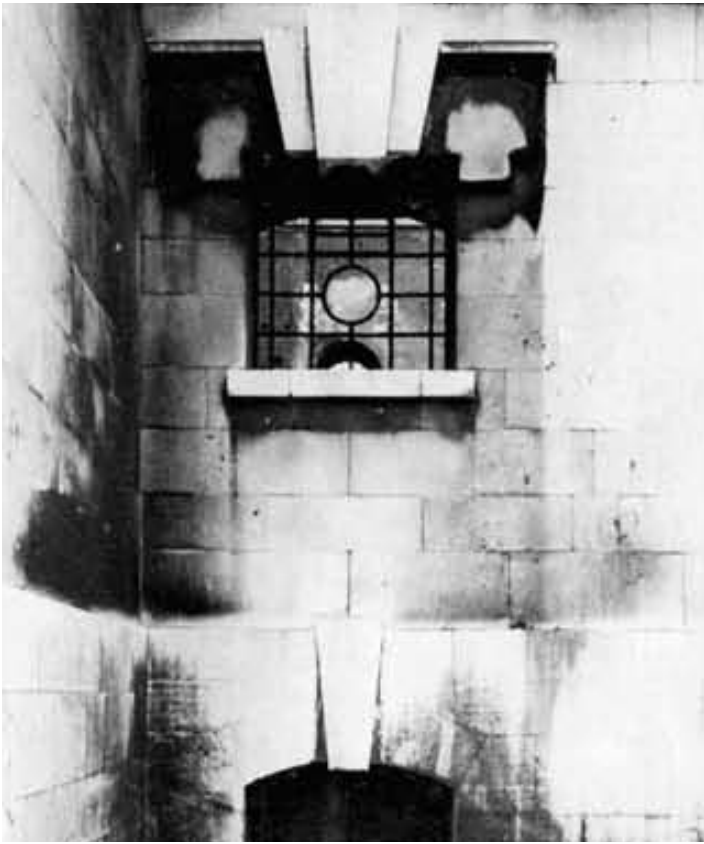


Figure 1.1
St. George-in-the-East by Nicholas Hawksmoor, 1729.



Figure 1.2
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts by Frank Furness, 1876.

Communication Joana Garmendia in her book *Irony*, mentions three major models on the pragmatics of irony:²⁶

- 1) Herbert Paul Grice's Model of Irony as Opposition: Irony occurs when the speaker says something that mean the opposite of what said.
- 2) Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's Model of Irony as Echo: Irony references statements attributed to other speakers, to criticize the veracity of that referenced statement.
- 3) Herbert Clark and Richard Gerrig's Model of Irony as Pretence: This is similar to a model of Irony as Echo, but the ironic speaker pretends to be speaking unironically, and creates a double audience - one is "in" and the other is excluded from ironic communication.

Empson's concepts are clearer once seen through the lens of pragmatics. Empson's description of ambiguity to some extent supports concepts mentioned in the first and second model of irony. Like Grice, Empson saw that irony presents a literal reading and an additional meaning which the reader must infer – though he did not claim the inferred meaning was opposite but rather as different from the literal or conventional meaning of the statement. Like Sperber and Wilson, Empson saw that irony references statements typically used in other contexts, and the listener must recognize and interpret the meaning of the reference. In the case of Shakespeare's Sonnet, the reader must recognize that statements typically used as declarative sentences are being used towards poetic effect. Empson elaborates more on reference as ambiguity in chapter 3 of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* which discusses when "two unconnected meanings"²⁷ are created from a "reference to more than one universe of discourse."²⁸ But it is Wayne Booth's description of the process of reading ironic ambiguity that most resembles Empson's concept of ambiguity. The following is a paraphrased version of what Wayne Booth proposes in his book *Rhetoric of Irony*, as the process of interpreting "stable" irony:²⁹

- 1) Literal/conventional reading is deemed insufficient.
- 2) Multiple meanings are identified.
- 3) Multiple meanings are deciphered.

²⁶ Joana Garmendia, *Irony*, Key topics in semantics and pragmatics (Cambridge, United Kingdom, New York, NY USA: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²⁷ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, v.

²⁸ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, v.

²⁹ Booth, *A rhetoric of irony*, 5



Figure 1.3
Bruges Cloth Hall, 1240.

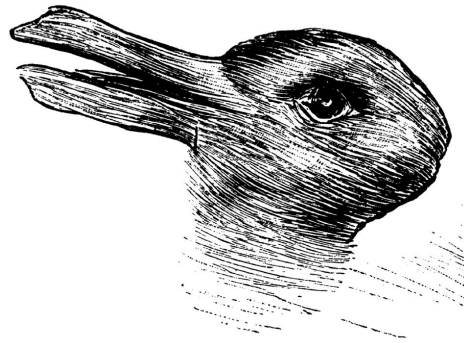


Figure 1.4
Rabbit-Duck Illusion,
1892.



Figure 1.5
Caixa Forum Madrid by Herzog and de Meuron, 2008.

- 4) Multiple meanings are merged into one.

Ambiguity in Architectural Expression

“Most of the examples will be difficult to "read," but abstruse architecture is valid when it reflects the complexities and contradictions of content and meaning. Simultaneous perception of a multiplicity of levels involves struggles and hesitations for the observer, and makes his perception more vivid.”³⁰

Whereas Empson discusses how conflicts between units of language – such as words, meanings, attributions – are resolved through the poem, Venturi discusses how local conflicts – such as between the old and the new, between different programs, visual conflict between forms, and the conflict between the expression of the interior and the exterior – are resolved at the broader scale of the building – what he calls the “difficult whole”. For example, what Venturi calls a double-functioning element is akin to what Empson calls a “detail [that] is effective in several ways at once”³¹, and Venturi’s contradiction juxtaposed is akin to what Empson considered as a word or idea that is “contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations”³². These similarities are no coincidence, as Venturi cites the New Critics as the source of their ideas.

Venturi presents an example of architectural ambiguity in the window of Hawksmoor’s St. George-in-the-East. The keystone is disproportionately large in relation to the opening it frames. Another example is the main stair in the Frank Furness’ Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine arts in Philadelphia. The stair is wider than the space it lands on. However, although these architectural features are “difficult to read” initially, this difficulty is resolved once you read the element in relation to the spaces beyond them. The oversized keystone by the window of the Hawksmoor’s St George-in-the-East is proportionate if seen at a distance along with the rest of the façade; the stair in the Frank Furness’ Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine arts in Philadelphia is justifiably wide if seen as a ceremonial stair in relation to the grand hall in front of it. Art historian Ernst Gombrich used the example of the “duck-rabbit” to illustrate this phenomenon of visual ambiguity in ornament. It is difficult for the eye to see the image as one single image as opposed to a combination of two; the image is ambiguous primarily due to its visual rather than semantic properties. Venturi points to another example of “ambiguity” in a façade of the Bruges Cloth Hall. It consists of a podium that relates to the street and also a tower that relates to rest of the city. The Bruges Cloth Hall, is visually

³⁰ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 25.

³¹ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

³² Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*



Figure 1.6
St. George's Bloomsbury by Nicholas Hawksmoor, 1729.

ambiguous like the keystone on the Hawksmoor's St. George-in-the-East, but also ambiguous in meaning because it signifies both "podium" and "tower". A contemporary example of an ambiguous architecture is Herzog and de Meuron's Caixa Forum in Madrid. The building intentionally juxtaposes visual incongruities. Transitions between the old and new are purposefully left abrupt and it is up to the viewer to understand how these disparate parts relate to each other.

Ambiguity as the Resolution of Conflict

So far, I have described how Venturi applies Empson's concept of poetic ambiguity to architecture. To summarize, according to Venturi, an ambiguous architecture is marked by three features: (1) It contains multiple elements. (2) The elements conflict with each other either visually and/or in the meaning they impart. (3) However, if viewed at a larger scale, these conflicts reveal to be in service of a greater unity. This understanding of ambiguity is primarily concerned with the communication of meaning. But the concept of ironic ambiguity carries additional philosophical implications.

For Venturi, ambiguity was not only a feature of architectural communication. Venturi did not only conceive of ambiguity as the resolution of multiple and conflicting meanings but also as the resolution of multiple and conflicting elements in the "real-world" - that is, beyond the realm of meaning. These additional philosophical implications of ambiguity can be seen in Venturi's description of Nicholas Hawksmoor's St. George, Bloomsbury. Each face of the building is different because it addresses different urban conditions. The building is "ambiguous" due to the multiplicity of expression, but also "ambiguous" due to its application of multiple urban strategies. Another example is his concept of the "vestigial element" which makes something new out of the old, like the 'medieval fortification walls in European cities' that became 'boulevards in the nineteenth century' or 'a section of Broadway [becoming] a piazza and a symbol rather than an artery to upper New York state.'³³The Caixa Forum Madrid mentioned previously would likely have been considered by Venturi as a usage of vestigial elements.

³³ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 40.

Ambiguity and Conflict as an Inevitability

“But architecture is necessarily complex and contradictory in its very inclusion of the traditional Vitruvian elements of commodity, firmness, and delight. And today the wants of program, structure, mechanical equipment, and expression, even in single buildings in simple contexts, are diverse and conflicting in ways previously unimaginable.”³⁴

Venturi’s concept of ambiguity also comes with the assertion that conflict is inevitable. He argues that the role of the architect is not to erase the presence of conflict (because it cannot be eliminated), but rather to organize conflicts into a unified whole – what he calls a “unity in variety” or the “difficult whole”.

These ideas associated with ambiguity make it central to the overall thesis *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, as the proposal of an architectural ideology that is intended to criticize and correct some of the problematic beliefs attributed to Modern architecture, specifically the belief that the architect is capable of tapping into some fundamental truth – that is unchanging and infallible – and is able to manifest it in the form of architecture. Venturi presents this idea in a quote by Frank Lloyd Wright: "Visions of simplicity so broad and far-reaching would open to me and such building harmonies appear that . . . would change and deepen the thinking and culture of the modern world."³⁵ He presents another quote by Le Corbusier which specifically advocates for an unambiguous architecture: ‘ And Le Corbusier, co-founder of Purism, spoke of the "great primary forms" which, he proclaimed, were "distinct . . .and without ambiguity."³⁶Le Corbusier’s notion of architecture as the embodiment of a Platonic Form echoes Muthesius’ concept of “Typification”. Muthesius believed architects should follow a single standard of design that would serve as a “universally valid form” rather than exercise their own personal taste. He believed that “only through typification, can [architecture]... recover that universal significance which was characteristic of it in times of harmonious culture.”³⁷

Venturi also expresses disagreement with the ideas of Mies van der Rohe: “Paul Rudolph has clearly stated the implications of Mies’ point of view: “All problems can never be solved... Instead, it is characteristic of the twentieth century that architects are highly selective in determining which problems they want to solve. Mies, for instance, makes

³⁴ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 16

³⁵ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 16.

³⁶ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 16

³⁷ Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture*, with the assistance of Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 28.

wonderful buildings because he ignores many aspects of a building.”³⁸This quote illustrates how strict adherence to standardization can lead to the ignorance of difference. Such criticism was often directed at Mies who in many of his projects, applied one approach to design to numerous buildings that conventionally would be designed quite differently. Particularly in America where Mies’ designs became synonymous with corporate architecture, Mies’ work also came to symbolize the contradiction between the Modernists’ supposed rejection of capitalism and the Modernist’s catering the rich clientele of Corporate America.

The philosophical implications of ambiguity can be summarized into three points: (1) It is inevitable that the architect will be faced with conflicts amidst the design process. (2) The role of the architect is to organize those conflicts (because they cannot be eliminated) into a unified whole – what he calls a “unity in variety” or the “difficult whole”. (3) This can only be achieved through an ambiguous architecture. Note that this conception of ambiguity is referring specifically to the ambiguity of “stable irony” – ambiguity that leads to a single meaning - not “unstable irony” which exhibits ambiguity that cannot be resolved into a single meaning.

Conflict as Aesthetic Unity

“Invulnerability to irony is the stability of a context in which the internal pressures balance and mutually support each other. The stability is like that of the arch: the very forces which are calculated to drag the stones to the ground actually provide the principle of support—a principle in which thrust and counterthrust become the means of stability.”³⁹

Venturi’s understanding of the philosophical implications of ambiguity was based on the works of Cleanth Brooks and I.A. Richards. Similar to Empson, the literary critic Cleanth Brooks in *Irony as Principle of Structure*, described a similar process of reading ironic ambiguity as the one proposed by Empson, in which contradictions in the text are resolved through additional inferences. Brooks likens the resolution of ambiguity to the way structure achieves stability by balancing opposing forces.⁴⁰

“Yet there are better reasons than that of rhetorical vainglory that have induced poet after poet to choose ambiguity and paradox rather than plain discursive simplicity. It is not enough for the poet to analyze his experience as the scientist does, breaking it up into parts, distinguishing part from part, classifying the various parts. His task is finally to unify experience. He must return to us the unity of the experience itself as

³⁸ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*.

³⁹ Cleanth Brooks, “Irony as a Principle of Structure,” 1971, 4, accessed October 16, 2019.

⁴⁰ Brooks, “Irony as a Principle of Structure,” 4

man knows it in his own experience...If the poet...must perforce dramatize the oneness of the experience, even though paying tribute to its diversity, then his use of paradox and ambiguity is seen as necessary. He is not simply trying to spice up, with a superficially exciting or mystifying rhetoric the old stale stockpot...He is rather giving us an insight which preserves the unity of experience and which, at its higher and more serious levels, triumphs over the apparently contradictory and conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern."⁴¹

But Brooks also argues that ambiguity resolves the “conflicting elements of experience”, and by implication, that the human experience is inevitably a contradictory experience. He distinguishes between “ambiguity” and “plain discursive simplicity”. He argues that simplicity is sufficient for the means of the scientist, however “experience” – that is, life lived, not simply thought – can only be resolved through ambiguity.⁴²

“To declare Science autonomous is very different from subordinating all our activities to it. It is merely to assert that so far as any body of references is undistorted it belongs to Science. It is not in the least to assert that no references may be distorted if advantage can thereby be gained. And just as there are innumerable human activities which require undistorted references if they are to be satisfied, so there are innumerable other human activities not less important which equally require distorted references or, more plainly, fictions.”⁴³

To fully understand Brooks concept of irony as a resolution of emotional conflict, it is necessary to look at its origins from I.A. Richards concept of “poetic synthesis”, which Brooks paraphrased as “a poetry which does not leave out what is apparently hostile to its dominant tone, and which, because it is able to fuse the irrelevant and discordant, has come to terms with itself and is invulnerable to irony.”⁴⁴

I.A. Richards, who was a New Critic that preceded Brooks, was one of the New Critics to first propose that poetry could resolve the conflict of human experience. Richards, who was previously trained as a Pavlovian psychologist, interpreted the resolution of poetry specifically as the resolution of conflicting psychological impulses. Like Brooks, he also saw poetry as a truth that was not factually verifiable, however, he goes further to consider poetry as a truthful lie or a useful illusion. The “truthful lie” which Richards speaks of is an idea that connects the New Critics with a much older lineage of thinkers dating back to Ancient

⁴¹ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, A harvest book 11 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1975), 194.

⁴² Brooks, *The well wrought urn*, 194

⁴³ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Routledge classics (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 249.

⁴⁴ Brooks, “Irony as a Principle of Structure,” 4.

Greece. The idea began with Aristotle, who like Plato, saw art as a lie, a “mimesis” - a simulation of our experience of life which in itself was a layer removed from “actual” life only present as platonic forms - but unlike Plato who saw art as a specious fiction, thus banning poets from the Republic, Aristotle saw the “lie” of art as valuable in its own right, in that it organizes the realm of experience in a way logic can’t. “Poets imitate things not as they are but as they should be. In other words, the business of poets is to organize, to bring form to bear on, the messiness of reality.”⁴⁵ Aristotle defends the illogicality of myth, by arguing that its illogicality is what allows it to induce a sense of emotional clarity, which he argues can’t be achieved by logic alone.

Returning to Brooks’ defense of irony, we can see how such ideas are relevant. Ambiguous irony – understood as a non-scientific or poetic form of language - becomes a way to achieve meaning “outside the descriptive, classificatory, propositional statements that “science” makes about external physical reality.”⁴⁶, with the implication that the human experience which poetry attempts to capture is also non-scientific and fundamentally plagued with contradictions and conflict. Professor of language, literature and communication, Art Berman sums up Brooks’ position as such:

“Irony is, then, structurally created in the tension between customary usage and constructed contextual meanings... The idea that irony (assuredly the opposite of scientific truth) is a structural necessity in poetry allows Brooks to identify irony with the fundamental contextual operation of poetry, its “dramatic” structure... The truth of the statement is what that statement is in context and is demonstrable in no other way.”⁴⁷

Conclusion

“It is the taut composition which contains contrapuntal relationships, equal combinations, inflected fragments, and acknowledged dualities. It is the unity which “maintains, but only just maintains, a control over the clashing elements which compose it. Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives . . . force.”⁵⁰ In the validly complex building or cityscape, the eye does not want to be too easily or too quickly satisfied in its search for unity within a whole... Some of the vivid lessons of Pop Art, involving contradictions of scale and context, should have awakened architects from prim dreams of pure order, which, unfortunately, are imposed in the

⁴⁵ Paul H. Fry, *Theory of Literature*, The open Yale courses series (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 57–58.

⁴⁶ Art Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism / Art Berman* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 56.

⁴⁷ Berman, *From the new criticism to deconstruction*, 53–55.

easy Gestalt unities of the urban renewal projects of establishment Modern architecture and yet, fortunately are really impossible to achieve at any great scope. And it is perhaps from the everyday landscape, vulgar and disdained, that we can draw the complex and contradictory order that is valid and vital for our architecture as an urbanistic whole.”⁴⁸

With the ideas of Venturi and those of Brooks and Empson fully elaborated upon, I would like to reiterate the connection between their ideas. Brooks argued that only ironic ambiguity could organize the fundamentally contradictory and conflicted nature of human experience. Venturi argues that architecture too should be ambiguous because the world which it interacts with is riddled with contradictions and conflicts. This is in contrast to the Modernist idea of the architect as someone who manifests universal truths in the form of architecture and thus enforcing order rather than embracing conflict in the environment. Empson’s work explains in greater detail how ambiguous language in poetry can resolve conflict. Venturi takes Empson’s ideas and applies it to architecture, thus forming a taxonomy of architectural ambiguities and describing how ambiguity can resolve conflict. These ideas come together to form an ideology of architecture based on poetic irony that rejects the metaphysical presumptions of Modernist architecture whilst preserving the idea of the architect as a “form-giver”, albeit giver of an altogether different kind of form - one that accommodates for local disorder but exhibits unity as a whole.

II. LIMITS OF THE DIFFICULT WHOLE

Mannerism and Unstable Irony

Similar to other justifications of irony - which will be discussed in the later chapters - the ironist proposes a model of imperfection or illogicality that is somehow justified considering the impossibility of what is logical and conventional. However, it is also important to consider whether there is a point at which such illogicality fails to convey meaning.

Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture offers a rather optimistic vision of irony, specifically a vision of ironic architecture functioning akin to what Wayne Booth called “stable irony”. However, many cases of “ambiguity” mentioned in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* are not stable but unstable, imparting meaning that is open-ended or indeterminate. Unlike the stable ironic “ambiguity” of the New Critics, ambiguity of this kind classifies as unstable irony: “Complex, undecidable or insecure ironies, where we

⁴⁸ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 104.

are not sure about sense, or where what is meant is not *clearly* recognisable, would then be regarded as special and marginal cases that deviate from the common ground of human understanding.”⁴⁹ Unstable irony expresses meaning that cannot be interpreted with certainty. Consequently, different discursive communities whose respective interpretations of unstable ironic meaning differ or compete with one another may argue over whose interpretation is more correct – and due to the controversial subject matter of unstable irony such arguments are often emotionally charged. Unstable irony also refers to irony intended towards malicious ends such as to lie, to obscure, or to ridicule.

This unstable side to irony is evident in Venturi’s attribution of ironic ambiguity to the style of Mannerism. Professor of Architecture Donald Kunze likens Mannerist composition to “monstrosity” in Classical literature:

“The monster runs against the idea of order usually discussed in architectural theory, namely that of Classical ideas of order—canons of proportionality, subordination of parts to wholes, and correct composition... the monster stands for nothing if not for contradiction. Monstrosity is perceived only if one sacrifices the literal and sane world of classical taxis... “[t]hat the monster was consciously thought to be a paradoxical or illicit “marriage” of contrasting forms and ideas is suggested by the Roman practice of calling the children of prostitutes “monsters”—literally the products of illicit unions”⁵⁰

In Classical literature, the monster represents a creature outside the moral order, a “paradoxical or illicit ‘marriage’ of contrasting forms and ideas”. For example, in the Greek myth of the Cretan Bull, Poseidon sends King Minos a white Bull, assuming it will be sacrificed to him, but Minos – seeing the bull as too fine to kill – offers an inferior bull to be sacrificed. Poseidon then punishes Minos by making his wife Aphrodite fall in love with the bull, resulting in the birth of the Minotaur - half man, half bull. Similarly, professor of literature and history Wylie Sypher uses the term Mannerism to refer to a stage of “disintegration”: “provisional formulation, a disintegration, a reintegration and a final academic codification—a cycle roughly equivalent to a succession of art styles or forms technically known as “renaissance” (a term, here, of limited meaning), mannerism, baroque, and late-baroque.”⁵¹ And within this context, Sypher refers to the “double functioning” element, but not something enriching and complex, as Venturi did in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, but rather as something subversive and illogical:

⁴⁹ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, The new critical idiom (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

⁵⁰ Donald Kunze, “Architecture as Reading; Virtuality, Secrecy, Monstrosity,” *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 41, no. 4 (1988), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1425010>.

⁵¹ Maarten Delbeke, “Mannerism and Meaning in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,” *The Journal of Architecture* 15, no. 3 (2010): 272, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2010.486562>.

“In mannerist facades there is a frank display of illogicality in the frequent double functioning of members, particularly where there appears a kind of architectural pun, a single member having a duplex use—a molding, for example, used as a sill. There is also a “principle of inversion” in mannerist facades, for the customary relation of orders is reversed by “permutations” of elements, conflicting directions, shifts in scale, or other overingenious devices that are learned but irresponsible. Often the closed units are not really bounded but placed in doubtful adjustment to the open units.”⁵²

Literary Critic and philologist Ernst Robert Curtius’ also describes mannerism as a style of distortion and perversion: unlike the classicist, who “has to say in a form naturally suited to the subject” and decorates according to “well-trying rhetorical tradition, that is, he will furnish it with ornatus.”, “in manneristic epochs, the ornatus is piled on indiscriminately and meaninglessly.”⁵³

These accounts of Mannerism suggest that the juxtaposition of conflicting elements characteristic to the “ambiguity” of the New Critics, can also manifest in destabilizing ways. One example of unstable irony expressed in architecture is the Guild House, an apartment for the elderly, which Venturi designed in 1960. The building accentuates what is typically deemed “ugly and ordinary” - in this case, the elements of “the traditional Philadelphia row houses” and “the tenement like backs of Edwardian apartment houses”⁵⁴. On the front façade, a symmetrical axis runs from what resembles a Palladian transom window on top, down to a set of balconies, followed by a large sign spelling “GUILD HOUSE”, then terminating at the bottom with a pillar of polished black granite landing center of the front entrance. According to Venturi, this “symmetrical, palazzo-like composition” assumes the effect of a “giant order”. And on the roof, there is a tv-antennae which Venturi calls a “sculpture in the manner of Lippold” and “a symbol of the aged, who spend so much time looking at T.V.”⁵⁵ Unlike the stable irony of the New Critics, the ambiguity of the Guild House does not lead to definite meaning. I would argue that the juxtaposition of the “irrelevant and discordant”, in this case does more to provoke or confuse comprehension than it does to enrich it. In particular, the T.V. antenna – which the residents of the Guild House took down soon after the building’s completion - was interpreted more as mockery as opposed to the perhaps benign though cheeky gesture Venturi intended it to be.

⁵² Delbeke, “Mannerism and meaning in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,” 272.

⁵³ Ernst Robert Curtius, Willard R. Trask and Colin Burrow, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Bollingen series XXXVI (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 274.

⁵⁴ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 116.

⁵⁵ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*, 116.



Figure 1.7 Guild House by Robert Venturi, 1960.

Figure 2.1
Facade from Strada Novissima by Hans Hollein, 1980.



CHAPTER 2: PARODY AS CRITICISM

Postmodern Critical Parody

Robert Venturi and the New Critics believed that irony enriched meaning; however, since the 20th Century and particularly during the postmodern era, irony has more often been conceived as a subversive form of communication. During the postmodern era, this destabilizing usage of irony came primarily in the form of parody used as criticism. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon described the *Poetics of Postmodernism* as primarily critical and parodic – it “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges.”⁵⁶ and “it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies”⁵⁷. Pastiche, what is considered a less critical but more ambiguous form of parody, is another term attributed to postmodernity. Marxist cultural theorist Frederic Jameson described pastiche as postmodern parody but “amputated of the satiric impulse”, a “blank parody”⁵⁸ – likely the type of irony author David Foster Wallace was thinking of when he described contemporary irony in the 1990s as “The song of the bird who enjoys being in the cage.”⁵⁹

The Benefit and Risks of Imitation

Parody was used to cast doubt upon what seemed to be commonly held knowledge and to highlight or upset imbalances of power. This subversive quality of ironic parody is largely due to its use of imitation. For example, in a political satire, the common phrases and gestures of the politician – which you would typically pay little attention to – are imitated such that they impart new meaning or reveal intentions that are otherwise less apparent. However, the use of imitation is both the strength and weakness of ironic parody. Imitation reveals new meaning in the ordinary, but in doing so, it also takes away the predictability and certainty of the ordinary. It reveals ambiguity in what seemed to be univocal: seemingly

⁵⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3

⁵⁷ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 11.

⁵⁸ Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 1982, 3, accessed October 15, 2019, https://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson_Postmodernism_and_Consumer_Society.pdf.

⁵⁹ David Wiley, “Transcript of the David Foster Wallace Interview,” accessed October 28, 2019, <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/jestwiley2.html>.

direct statements become imbued with additional meaning and simple actions become entangled with additional intentions. Parody tends towards what literary critic Wayne Booth referred to as “unstable irony”. Unlike “stable irony” which presents multiple meanings that can be resolved into one, “unstable irony” presents multiple readings that do not resolve into one meaning, thus inviting “further demolitions and reconstructions” of meaning.⁶⁰ Frederic Jameson argued that postmodern culture was overly saturated with an unstable and destabilizing irony, such that irony’s critical ability had become “paralyzed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself.”⁶¹ Parody is also known to obscure the intentions of the parodist. At times, imitation acts like reference, but at other times – when irony is misinterpreted, unnoticed, or intentionally hidden certain audiences-imitation acts more like deception or dissimulation.

But despite these problems, parody has consistently been used as a cogent form of critical expression. This chapter discusses both the strengths and complications associated with parody, and three ways parody has been used as a form of criticism in architecture: (1) Parody as a form of “open questioning”, that is, when one criticizes but without presenting a solution. Instead of a solution, the problem is treated intertextually, identifying the relationship between parts and wholes in a way that presents multiple potential solutions with no commitment to any single solution. (2) Parody as a form of criticism when no appropriate form of expression is available or if it is suppressed which often occurs in contexts of protest. (3) Parody as a form of self-criticism. In these cases, critical irony is used as a form of self accountability; ideology is pursued yet invalidated at the same time.

I. IMITATION AS ECHO AND PRETENCE IN PARODY

Parody as Imitative Irony

Before discussing how parody can be used as form of criticism, I’d like to elaborate on what parody is from a more general point of view. There is no commonly agreed upon definition of parody, however parody is often distinguished from satire, with parody conceived as primarily an act of imitation and satire conceived as imitation with malicious intent. However, I use the term “parody” to refer to all cases of irony that communicate primarily through imitation.

⁶⁰ Booth, *A rhetoric of irony*, 6.

⁶¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*.

The presence of imitation is not unique to parody, rather imitation is to some extent present in all ironic statements. Linguists have conceived of imitation to occur in irony in two ways: as “echo” and “pretence”. According to linguists Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s “Echoic” theory of irony, all cases of irony implement some form of imitation because ironic statements always say something other than what is meant, hence irony is said to be “echoic” because it is an utterance that is attributed to a source other than the speaker themselves at the present moment. Thus, according Sperber and Wilson irony predominantly an act of reference.⁶² However, in linguists Herbert Clark and Richard Gerrig’s theory of irony as “pretence”, it is argued that irony does not echo statements attributed to another source but rather the ironist “*pretends to use* a proposition [attributed to another source] instead of truly using it”⁶³. Often pretence and echo will occur at the same time though one may be more apparent or dominant than the other depending on the situation.

Echo in Parody

Linda Hutcheon describes parody as an irony that “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges.”⁶⁴ This essentially a description of irony as echo. Just as in a verbal irony, in parody, utterances attributed to another source or context are used in another context thus giving them new meaning. In parody, echo can come in a form that ranges from respectful reference to mockery.

Echo used as reference is akin to “intertextuality” which is a literary device often used in parody to establish a relationship between texts. For example, metafiction is said to be intertextual because it consciously implements tropes, literary conventions, or references to other texts to communicate the hidden or typically unnoticed workings of the text - and not necessarily to mock or disparage the texts or tropes that it alludes to. Parody is often mistaken as a medium that can only ridicule, however the etymology of the word parody implies that it offers a range of expression. The word parody is derived from of the Ancient Greek word *paroidia* meaning “counter-song”, which is a combination of the words *para* and *ōidē* meaning ode. But *para* does not only mean “counter” but also “besides” which suggests that parody can also be used to communicate adjacencies and contiguities.⁶⁵ Echo can also come in the form of mockery. An example of such is political parody, more often categorized as “political satire”.

⁶² Garmendia, *Irony*, 42.

⁶³ Garmendia, *Irony*, 67.

⁶⁴ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3

⁶⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms / Linda Hutcheon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 32.

Pretence in Parody

The presence of pretence in irony is regarded as an unpleasant consequence of parody, because depending on the situation, “pretending” can sometimes turn into “lying” whether on purpose or by accident. However, some form of pretence is necessary for imitation to occur and some even argue that all ironic statements have the potential to be misunderstood.⁶⁶This is because irony is founded upon a discrepancy between the conventional meaning of a statement and its inferred (ironic) meaning.

The potential for the misinterpretation of parody is often habitually overlooked – likely because people tend to overrate the semantic certainty of their words. For example, a study on the political satire of the *Colbert Report*, showed that “conservatives were more likely to report that Colbert only pretends to be joking and genuinely meant what he said while liberals were more likely to report that Colbert used satire and was not serious when offering political statements.”⁶⁷This suggests that irony is less univocal in its message than we would typically think. In such a situation, it could be said that the parodist is in fact lying rather than pretending. This association of irony to lying dates as far back as Plato’s Socrates use of Socratic Irony.

Deception in parody can also manifest at the scale of discursive communities. Irony is said to be “exclusionary” as it is “inclusionary”; because it reveals to one audience by hiding from another or “pretending” to one audience and lying to another. At times, it may be unclear whether the ironist is in fact just pretending or lying to you. The victim of irony, the audience, and surrounding bystanders, have no way of ascertaining the true meaning and intent of the critical ironic statement because the ironist could plausibly deny that they are being ironic at all.⁶⁸For example, professor of politics Keir Milburn argues that president Donald Trump uses ironic “double talk” to avoid being held responsible for what he says. Author Salena Zito described the situation as such: “the press takes him [Trump] literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally’.⁶⁹In the rest of this chapter, we will be looking at why these complications associated with pretence in irony are problematic but necessary in parody used as criticism.

⁶⁶ Colebrook, *Irony*, 12.

⁶⁷ Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville, and Michael A. Beam, “The Irony of Satire,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 2 (2009): 212, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208330904>, <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/1940161208330904>.

⁶⁸ Hutcheon, *Irony's edge*, 48–49.

⁶⁹ Milburn, “The comedian as populist leader: Postironic narratives in an age of cynical irony,” 239–40.

II. SOCRATIC IRONY

Socratic Questioning

Socratic irony offers an example of how the imitative features of irony that are most apparent in parody can be used as a form of productive criticism despite its many drawbacks. Socratic Irony refers to Socrates' use of critical irony in the dialogues of Plato. Socrates would be faced with an interlocutor who would make a claim that was uncontroversial but false, like for example, "Courage is endurance of the soul" or "justice is paying back what one owes"⁷⁰. Socrates would prove the interlocutor wrong not by direct argumentation but through feigned ignorance and flattery. He would compliment and ask for clarification to coax the interlocutor to further reinforce and unknowingly reveal contradictions in their argument: "if justice is paying back what one owes, would it be just to return an axe to a deranged man? So if love is not possessing what one desires can we say that we know what love is?"⁷¹ Eventually the interlocutor would learn the error of his ways - called a state of *aporia*, characterized by doubt or puzzlement – and the original claim would be proven false. Like parody, imitation and indirection are at work in Socratic Irony. Imitation, in this case, is not acted out directly through Socrates, rather Socrates leads the interlocutor to unknowingly perform what is interpreted as mocking interpretation of himself.

Dissimulation in Socratic Irony

The earliest description of the Socratic Ironist was as the character of the Eiron. The Eiron is a Greek stock character who is paired with the antagonist character the Alazon. The Eiron is characterized by understated wit and the (Braggart) Alazon is characterized by ignorance and hubris. Stories based on these two characters inevitably involve the Eiron outsmarting the over confident Alazon. Uncoincidentally, the term irony originates from the term Eiron which comes from the also Greek word *Eironiea* meaning dissimulation. The attribution of the Eiron to the Socratic Ironist highlights a fundamental character trait of the critical ironist. The difference between the Eiron and the Alazon is not by measure of moral virtue, but rather the difference between being awareness and ignorant. Similarly, Socrates' primary goal is not to prove the interlocutor wrong, but rather his goal is to cast doubt upon the process through which the interlocutor comes to false conclusions – a state of *aporia*. And the fact that the (interlocutor's) process demonstrates to be so deceptively true – relatively uncontroversial to the greater public, and seemingly credible even as interlocutor repeats that

⁷⁰ Colebrook, *Irony*, 23.

⁷¹ Colebrook, *Irony*, 23.

flawed process to himself - only makes clearer that Socrates' corrective presence is needed. This unique ability to reveal exactly why and how something is wrong, by inducing the problem to reveal itself is one of the main benefits in using irony over other forms of communication.

Complications of Socratic Irony

However, as is the case with parody, Socratic irony also comes with certain complications. Despite what the Eiron and Alazon story may imply, the slick social maneuvering of Socratic Irony comes at significant cost to the ironist. To emphasize again, the goal of the Socratic Ironist is to cast doubt on how one thinks, not to disprove a claim in itself; in other words, *aporia* is a state of doubt and puzzlement, which is not the same as a state of being intrinsically wrong. But because the ironist casts doubt on how one thinks, in order to adhere, or rather to not contradict his own argument, the ironist cannot adhere to any paradigm of thought himself.⁷² In other words, by inducing *aporia*, the ironist also becomes affected by *aporia*. Correspondingly, in these dialogues, Socrates (until the later dialogues) does not define what the "good life" actually is even though he is technically living the good life. From the 19th Century onwards, Socrates' ambiguity had been subject to increasing scrutiny, causing some to consider Socrates as perhaps even "nothing other than his distance from received rhetoric".⁷³ However, concerns as such regarding the moral ambiguity of irony have always existed; for example, Aristotle did not consider irony not pernicious, but nowhere near virtuous either, instead he believed that the ideal citizen was "neither boastful, nor ironic, but sincere in his self-presentation."⁷⁴ But criticisms regarding the moral ambiguity of Socrates should be thought of as more a caveat than an outright critique of critical irony; ultimately, Socrates' defeat of sophistry was done through irony, an achievement that is attributed to the birth of the philosopher as the thinker who contemplates universal truths independent of human praxis though it also permanently denied a direct engagement with truth.

The Double Edge of Socratic Irony

To summarize, Socratic Irony demonstrates that parody can be used productively despite its drawbacks, it also illustrates that those drawbacks are what allow parody to communicate meaning that otherwise cannot be communicated. I think of Socratic Irony as a

⁷² Colebrook, *Irony*, 29–30.

⁷³ Colebrook, *Irony*, 29–30.

⁷⁴ Colebrook, *Irony*, 6.

form of criticism that is double edged, with one edge pointed at the victim and the other back at the perpetrator. Socratic irony encourages an attitude of skepticism towards habitual truths but to do so, Socrates is required to lie – in order to escape the confines of language - and the resultant aporia infects not only the knowledge of falsity but of truth for both the interlocutor and the ironist himself. The next section describes situations that demand this dissatisfactory and problematic form of criticism.

III. THREE APPLICATIONS OF PARODY AS CRITICISM

Postmodern Parody

Many of the attitudes embodied in Socratic Irony are compatible with postmodern ideas, and thus many of the justifications for postmodern parody are conceived in a similar way to Socratic Irony. Both postmodern theory and Socratic irony share an emphasis on self-consciousness and an “incredulity towards meta-narratives”⁷⁵, which result in the prioritization of provisional processes – like questioning, criticism, and reflection – over absolute answers. As we’ve seen in Socratic Irony, postmodern irony is similarly a way to explore potential answers and question existing answers without coming to a final conclusion. Similar to Socratic Irony, postmodern parody also functioned upon the premise that the ironist was unable to solve the problems they critiqued. Postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida described such a situation as: when everything is “implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were from the very beginning at stake in the game.”⁷⁶As mentioned earlier, we will look at three ways architects have used parody to overcome such a scenario.

A. Intertextuality as Open Questioning

The first form of parody I will be discussing is parody that functions primarily through reference. In the postmodern context, this use of parody is akin to what literary critic and philosopher Julia Kristeva called “intertextuality” which is a literary device that draws relationships between the meaning of one text to other texts. Intertextuality is a concept that merged literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism and heteroglossia, to Saussurean semiotics. The result is a concept that the meaning of a text is

⁷⁵ Lyotard, *The postmodern condition*.

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (1970), 1.

formed by the text's relation to all other texts, and not as traditionally thought, formed by the author.

“[Intertextuality] has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another, or with the sources of a literary work; it does, on the other hand, involve the components of a *textual system* such as the novel, for instance. It is defined in *La Revolution du langage poetique* as the transposition of one or more *systems* of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position.”⁷⁷

Similar refutations against the author-text relationship were made earlier by the New Critics, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in their book *Intentional Fallacy*, and later nearing the 1970s in literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes' book *The Death of the Author*. In postmodernism, this led to the increasing prevalence of art, literature, and architecture in which intertextuality is amplified to the extent where it takes over any conventional sense of the text as a self-contained or autonomous entity.

Texts as Intertexts

Parodic works manifest intertextuality by alluding to other works or appropriating features of other works in order to highlight the greater field of texts from which its meaning is dependent upon. The role of intertextual reference in parody is to highlight that texts are constructed, written not only by authors but bearing the mark of other forces. Like Socratic Irony, intertextual parody reveals the operations that form a given work and allows the viewer to better scrutinize the validity of that work.

However, parody does not simply describe itself as a convergence of other texts, but it also ascribes itself the same referential potential as it does in the texts it references. That is, it relegates itself to the same ranks as the texts it references, and thus, exhibiting the same ambivalence and ambiguity as the Socratic Ironist. “Parody does not, indeed cannot, have the last word: its metalanguage proposes necessarily the existence of at least another, equally valid one, and thus undermines its power and status vis-a-vis the parodied work.”⁷⁸ Sometimes, parody undermines itself implicitly, but it can also be done more explicitly. For example, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night* is about a reader who is reading the book *If on a Winter's Night*; the “signifying chain”⁷⁹ which the text a part of is alluded to quite literally. This imbues parody with a sense of un-reality, or uncanny, that is comparable to the

⁷⁷ Julia Kristeva and Leon S. ed Roudiez, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, European perspectives (N.Y.: Columbia U.P, 1980).

⁷⁸ Michele Hannoosh, “The Reflexive Function of Parody,” *Comparative Literature* 41, no. 2 (1989): 117, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1770971>.

⁷⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A selection* (London: Routledge, 2001, c1977), 418.

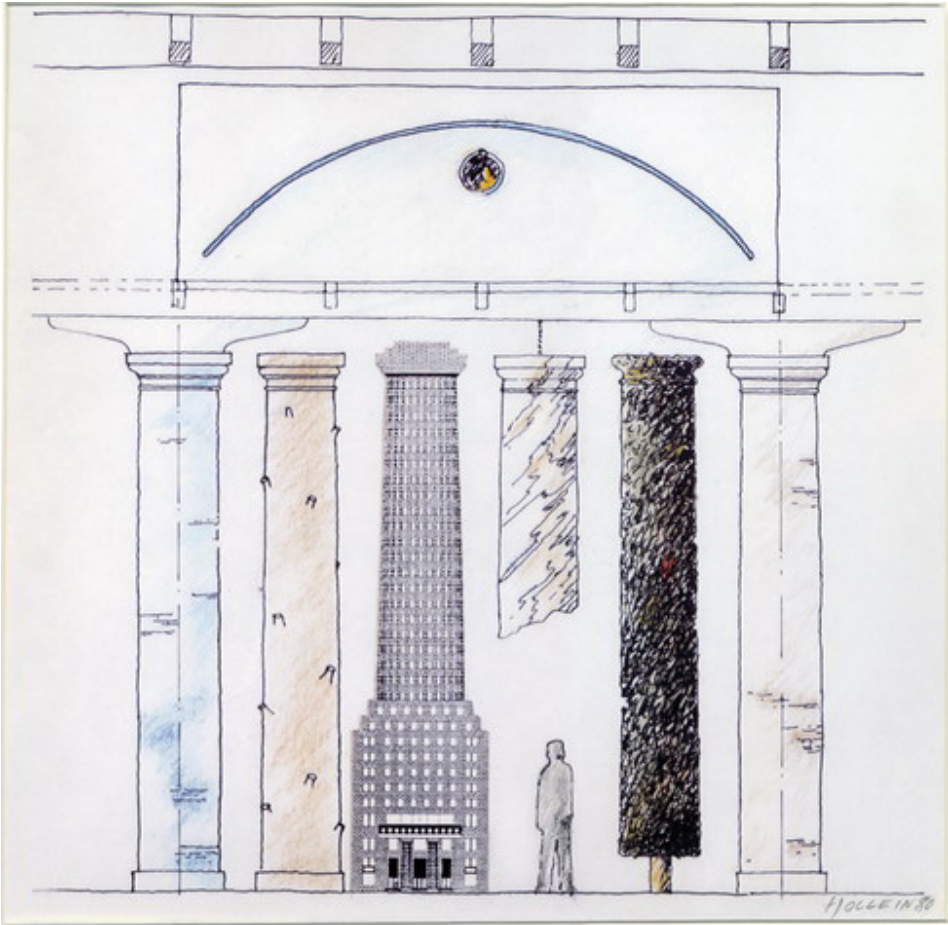


Figure 2.2
Elevation of Facade from Strada Novissima by Hans Hollein. 1980.

dissociative symptoms of derealization. However, this most disturbing quality of irony is also the necessary side-effect of parody's goal: "to retain aesthetic autonomy while still returning the text to the "world." But it is not a return to the world of "ordinary reality," as some have argued (Kern 1978, 216); the "world" in which these texts situate themselves is the "world" of discourse, the "world" of texts and intertexts. This "world" has direct links to the world of empirical reality, but it is not itself that empirical reality."⁸⁰ Like the Socratic Ironist, in order to truthfully engage knowledge, the notion of truth itself must wither away, thus eliminating both the subject and the object of contemplation.

The Strada Novissima

The Strada Novissima of the Venice Biennale of 1980, an exhibition based on the theme "presence of the past" as decided by Paolo Portoghesi curator of the exhibition, highlights the parodic exchanges that came to characterize the relationship between postmodern architecture and history. The exhibition consisted of 20 facades, each designed by a different architect. The participants varied in their attitudes to history; there were anti-classicists, rationalists, revivalists, and eclectics. But in particular, Hans Hollein's entry exemplified the parodic spirit of postmodern historicism. Like the authors of historiographical metafiction, the parodic postmodern architect revisits the past "but with irony, not innocently"⁸¹. This ironic distance was implicated in the very premise of the exhibition. Jencks mentions that the "edifices were for edification", in addition to being "Pop expressions of a new attitude to architecture meant to communicate".⁸² Ironically, Hans Hollein's entry lived up to this ironic premise by actually breaking the rules of the exhibition, that is, he revealed the original columns of the building. Between two "real" columns, are references to columns, of which none are actually load bearing columns. There is a column in the effect of a tree and another covered in foliage – perhaps referencing the origins of the Doric column from sacred trees. There is also a column in the form of the Chicago Tribune Column by Adolf Loos, and a column cut at the base which acts as a doorway. The fact that the "false" columns are reiterations of the "real" columns of the building gives the additional sense of un-reality we see in metafiction. What is supposedly "real" history has been subsumed into the field of referential histories.

⁸⁰ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 125.

⁸¹ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, First Mariner Books edition (Boston: Mariner Books, 2014).

⁸² Jencks, *The story of post-modernism*

B. Oppositional Imitation in Parodic Protest

Intertextual parody highlights the operations behind a given work, however like Socratic Irony, it also encourages a skepticism that makes the validity of all works uncertain but does not provide any solution to that uncertainty. But parody takes on a more constructive form when used in contexts of protest where asymmetrical balances of power are present

Unlike intertextual parody, parody used as a form of protest is not ambiguous but clearly expresses the presence of opposition. Parody used in this way resembles how irony is conceived in linguist Herbert Paul Grice's theory of "Irony as opposition" which argues that irony always means – both semantically and in attitude - the opposite of what it says. In this case, parody incorporates what it seeks to criticize or protest against, thus communicating an attitude of opposition towards the subject it depicts. This understanding of parody is closest to Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as something that "uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges."⁸³

Imbalances of Power and Expressive Freedom

The juxtaposition of opposites present in parodic protest often manifests as the juxtaposition of opposing discursive communities, with one community having more expressive freedom and power over another. In such cases, parody may also be covert. For example, this can be seen in African American Spirituals of the late eighteenth century, which were codified protest songs sung by African American slaves. These songs were disguised as work songs, but contained double meanings not understood by their white masters.

Professor of Language and Literature Mary Louise Pratt uses the term "contact zone" to describe such a scenario: "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today."⁸⁴ Pratt presents irony as a way to safely and effectively navigate a contact zone. She points to a particular instance of such in a parodic letter written by an indigenous Andean, named Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, to Philip III, King of Spain in 1613.

The letter was written in a mixture of Quecha, and an expressive and ungrammatical Spanish. But at 1613, as well when the letter was uncovered in 1908, Quecha was not

⁸³ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3

⁸⁴ Mary L. Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, 1991, 33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>.

understood to be a written language, and Andean not a literate culture. The book consisted of two parts. The first part, titled “New Chronicle” was a rewriting of the world viewed through a Christian Lens, into one centered not on Europeans but through Andeans: “He identifies five ages of Christian history that he links in parallel with the five ages of canonical Andean history--separate but equal trajectories that diverge with Noah and reintersect not with Columbus but with Saint Bartholomew, claimed to have preceded Columbus in the Americas.”⁸⁵The second part, called “Good Government and Justice”, was a criticism of Spanish exploitation and abuse.

Parodic Reference used towards Destruction and Re-creation

In Guaman Poma’s letter, we see the elements of parody as I defined previously, but reworked. In this case, intertextuality is implemented, but not primarily to reference or to draw the relationship between texts, but rather to make place for a new type of text not accommodated for in the literary canon and socio-political climate.

The goal of intertextuality has shifted from the act of reference, to the act of “re-creation and creation”⁸⁶. It should also be noted, the Andeans were not a literate culture, and thus not only was their voice not permitted by their Spanish colonizers, but there was no “voice” to speak of. But by forming a new language that is presented by reference to the language of their majority group, the bounds of the pre-existing socio-linguistic framework is expanded. Thus, in this case, the negational quality of critical irony feels much more acceptable at a moral level because its leads to regeneration.

This aligns with professor of comparative literature Michele Hanoosh’s argument that the open ended or intertextual nature of parody contributes to “furthering the development of literary forms and guaranteeing continuity of literary history...[parody] actually regenerates ... procedures [that] have become (or have the potential to become) mechanized, and thus contributes to the ongoing history of literature”⁸⁷Parody dismantles the confines of literary forms in order to make way for new ones. Another redeeming feature of Guaman Poma’s letter is that it is clearer in its intent than the parody of “open questioning” described earlier. Irony used in the “contact zone” is ironically more transparent despite there being more at stake.

⁸⁵ Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” 34.

⁸⁶ Hutcheon, *A theory of parody*, 101.

⁸⁷ Hanoosh, “The Reflexive Function of Parody,” 116.

“Parody mocks and transforms, undermines and renews (Rose 61), thus putting its critical function ultimately in the service of literary creation and continuity. In rebounding upon itself, leaving room for other versions or even suggesting the forms these might take, parody ensures that the tradition it revises will continue even beyond itself.”⁸⁸

The Hamburg Monument Against War and Fascism

In the Hamburg Monument Against War and Fascism, this form of parody used in the context of memorial architecture. Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz called it a “counter-monument”, which already implies the simultaneous appropriation and criticism present in parody. The counter monument is both a monument, as well as an act of dissent against it. Whereas parody is typically known to be ambivalent and ambiguous the counter-monument clearly both implements and rejects the architectural language it seeks to “counter” not as a form of “open-questioning” but rather as an open provocation.

Monuments are traditionally celebrations of a nation’s past, in which victims are seen as martyrs, and their deaths as sacrifices for the survival of the nation. Hence, a monument dedicated the remembering the victims of a nation’s crimes presents a design problem plagued by a uniquely paradoxical set of demands.⁸⁹The Hamburg Monument Against War and Fascism solves this problem by proposing a traditional obelisk made in lead. People are told to write in it with a steel-pointed stylus, and as the inscriptions take up more space, the monument is lowered accordingly, eventually being completely submerged in the ground. It is a counter-monument that could be thought of as self erasing. In relation to Guaman Poma’s letter, the counter monument presents a reversal of positions – in this case the parodist is not the oppressed, but rather the party who is in power. Here self-reflexivity is also used to subvert dominant discourse, but in this case, the parodist is not excluded but rather an insider of the dominant discourse who seeks to criticize the uneven lines of power embedded within the available means expression. But unlike Socratic Irony and intertextual parody which does not encourage further action apart from skepticism, this instance of parody communicates a clear desire to improve upon what already exists. In this case, we see that intertextuality offers an additional dimension to criticism that cannot be gained from a depiction that escapes the depiction it rejects altogether. When there is no appropriate response to the

⁸⁸ Hannoosh, “The Reflexive Function of Parody,” 116.

⁸⁹ James E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992): 270, accessed October 16, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/stable/1343784>.

problem, or when all responses whether for or against the problem are problematic in themselves, it may be best to implement the problematic response into your solution.

C. Pastiche as Self Criticism

We just looked at an example of parody that tends towards a constructive rather than negating function. But there are also instances where the parodist is intentionally used to jeopardize the validity of one's own argument. This may not be parody but more a parody of parody, akin to Jameson's definition of pastiche:

"Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs: it is to parody what that other interesting and historically original modern thing, the practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the "stable ironies" of the eighteenth century."⁹⁰

This self undermining quality of pastiche can be seen in the Strawbale House – also called “Stock Orchard Street” - a house designed by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects to function as both the residence of Sarah Wigglesworth and her husband Jeremy Till, and as the office space of Sarah Wigglesworth Architects. The project can be read in two ways. The first and more conventional interpretation, is to consider it an “Eco House” due to its use of environmentally sustainable features, materials with low embodied energy, and passive strategies. Visually, the Strawbale House is a mix between what Jencks calls the style of “urban collage”⁹¹ - to be found in the residential projects of Frank Israel, the houses Charles Moore designed in his later years, and particularly resembling the Gehry House in Santa Monica - and the “ad-hoc” style that has come to be attributed with projects that pursue a “high tech” aesthetic but with “low tech” or environmentally sustainable materials – like for example, the work of Bill Dunster, Lacaton & Vassal, or MVRDV's Pavillion for the 2000 World Expo, and some of the DIY elements of hippie communes of the 60s and 70s like Drop City in Colorado.⁹² But there is a second and more suspect narrative to be read in the Strawbale House. Descriptors like “humorous”, “joke”, “double entendre”, or “sensationalist”⁹³, crop up occasionally – sometimes used by critics to applaud the architects

⁹⁰ Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 3.

⁹¹ Jencks, *The story of post-modernism*.

⁹² Jencks, *The story of post-modernism*.

⁹³ Peter Davey, “Sarah Wigglesworth Architects' Straw Bale House,” accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.architectural-review.com/buildings/sarah-wigglesworth-architects-straw-bale-house/8659813.article>.



Figure 2.3
Hamburg Monument
Against War and
Fascism by Esther
Shalve-Gerz and
Jochen Gerz ,1986.

Monument has
lowered completely
into the ground.

Figure 2.4
Hamburg Monument Against War and Fascism by Esther Shalve-
Gerz and Jochen Gerz ,1986.

for the boldness of their vision, but at other times, to scrutinize the sometimes excessively whimsical elements in the Strawbale House, seemingly solely intended to stir controversy. One might even interpret the Strawbale as a parody of an Eco House.

Sarah Wigglesworth describes a process of intertextual reference in her drawing series of a messy dining table. The series of drawings depict an initially clean and pre-arranged dining table which gets progressively more chaotic, and according to her story, the guests more unpredictable and inebriated. By the end of the drawing series, the table is left disheveled, and carefully arranged utensils are left as a mere formality not observed. For Wigglesworth, the process of design and construction is much like the events at such a dinner table - not everything goes as planned, and the final result is the product of numerous moving parts, actors and their actions. The Strawbale House was intended to embody that aftermath of the dining table: to be a building that presents itself not as an autonomous product but a product of a cumulative process that includes successes as well as mishaps. The most obvious instance of this self-revelation is the transparent polycarbonate façade that reveals the strawbale insulation in the wall. The transparent opening creates a literal and phenomenal transparency – literally revealing the typically hidden contents of the wall and revealing a process of construction, and in addition to that, starting a conversation about what environmentally sustainable architecture is and the concept of transparency in green architecture. And in a time where the green washing of architecture has become ubiquitous, there is something to be appreciated in its honesty.

But the self-scrutiny of the Strawbale House goes a step further, it not only reveals the processes that led to its existence, but criticizes the validity of its existence in the first place. It also questions the validity of what that “doing” aims to achieve. One of these moments can be seen in the peeling sandbags on the south east façade which are intended to deteriorate over time. As the sandbags are exposed to the elements, the textile skin will peel off and the lime sand mixture inside will deteriorate. And there a multitude of other moments – a wall covered in textile, non-structural gabions around columns, springs connecting the column to the building -scattered throughout the building. These moments appear to parody the critical parody we have seen in the previous examples, almost as a denunciation of the constructive potential of the parody.

Conclusion

The concept of parody when read in relation to the New Critics provides a useful comparison between the semantic and syntactic features of irony and how they may translate in practical applications. In parody, the multiplicity of meaning and semantic ambiguity is



Figure 2.5
 Straw Bale House by Sarrah Wigglesworth Architects, 2001.
 Strawbale Wall Enclosed in Polycarbonate Facade.

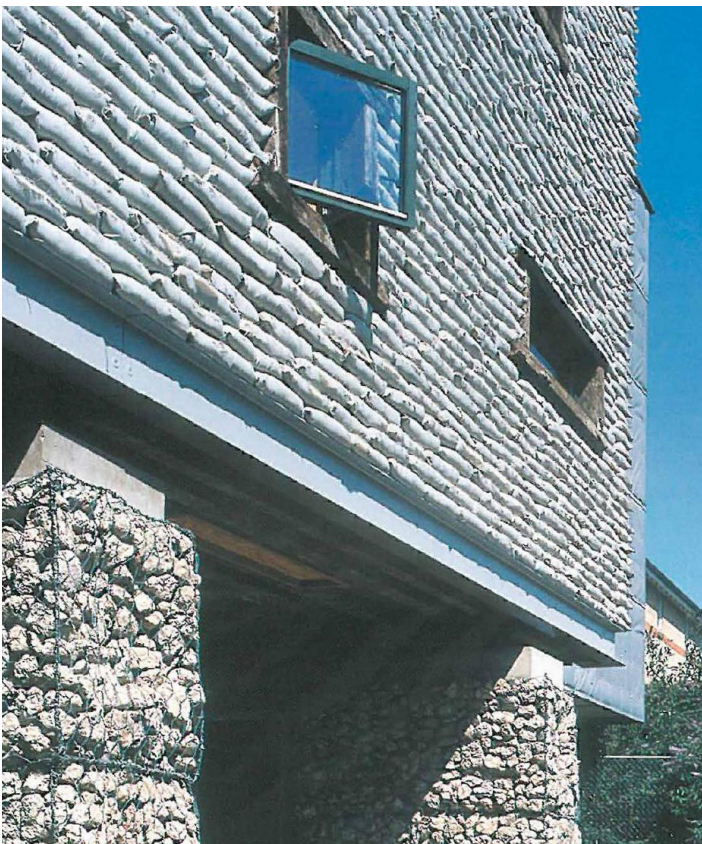


Figure 2.6
 Straw Bale House by Sarrah Wigglesworth Architects, 2001.
 Wall of Lime Cement Sandbags and Columns clad in Gabions.

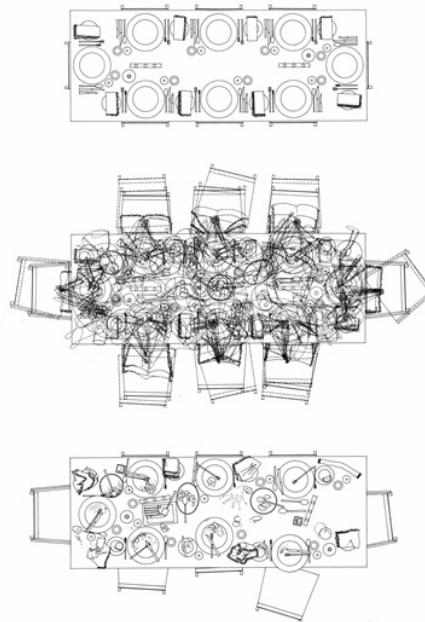


Figure 2.7
 Drawing of Messy
 Dining Table by Sarah
 Wigglesworth, 2001.

used to express multiple viewpoints which are at times ambiguous because the ironist is either undecided, conflicted, or still processing their ideas. The fact that parody is used in asymmetrical balances of power, or what Pratt calls “contact zones”, makes sense; the ironist literally inhabits the liminal space between uneven lines of power.

But unlike the New Critics who considered irony to communicate an ambiguous but concrete and conclusive meaning, parody deliberately leaves meaning fragmented into a field of intertexts. This is both the strength and the weakness of ironic parody. This aspect ironic parody can also be interpreted as ambivalence. This can be seen in the negative features of irony covered in this chapter, namely its inclination towards negation rather than affirmation, its potential for ideological ambivalence, and in the case of pastiche, an expression of mockery and derision that is devoid of any critical functions.



Figure 3.1
BEST Stores, "Facade Brick
Pile" by SITE, 1975.

CHAPTER 3: IRONIC NARRATIVES

“irony as an expressive form of the metaphysical vision, the fruit of the growing suspicion that life is essentially meaningless. The creative imagination must somehow come to terms with the implications of this spiritual outlook; it can never surrender completely to this negative belief without falling into the suicide of silence. For if life is utterly meaningless, then logic is a delusion, language a snare, the sense of purpose a self-induced fraud, art a vain projection of consciousness, communication a myth. Hence to maintain that life is a nightmare of absurdity, and to do so within the controlled framework of art, is, paradoxically, a way of triumphing over it.”⁹⁴

Ironic Narratives of Personality and Culture

During the postmodern era it was increasingly felt that “culture... [could] no longer provide an adequate account of the world with which to construct or order our lives.”⁹⁵ The postmodern experience has been described as decentered, fragmented, unfeeling, yet somehow also marked by a “peculiar kind of euphoria”⁹⁶ that is “free-floating and impersonal”.⁹⁷ The subject who finds themselves amidst this confusing cultural circumstance has often been depicted in fiction in the form of the ironic personality. Like the Socratic Ironist, such a subject is unable to fully immerse themselves in their beliefs and actions, and is always guarded from the pitfalls of committing to any single mode of thought. In this chapter I will discuss the concept of a postmodern ironic personality and how dramatic irony has been used in architecture to give shape to the postmodern experience.

Recognizing irony’s potential as a source of emotional solace or as a reflection of the human condition explains the prevalence for irony outside its critical functions. The ironic figure served such a function in Greek Tragedies - which depicted contradictions of personal will and fate, also called Tragic Irony - and has continued to do so throughout many traditions of literature. Whereas irony as a mode of speech highlights subjectivity, the ironic character provides a way to vicariously experience how it may manifest within the confines of a fictional world. The following pages discuss: (1) A description of the postmodern

⁹⁴ Charles I. Glicksberg, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature* (Springer Science + Business Media B.V, 1969), 13.

⁹⁵ Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmoderism and Identity / Mike Featherstone*, Theory, culture & society (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 1.

⁹⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, 22.

⁹⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, 22.

subject, specifically its skepticism for language and expression, and the inability to summon emotion and meaning. The former I will be discussing through the perspective of philosopher Richard Rorty's concept of the postmodern ironist as a code of conduct for liberal political participation, and the latter, I will be discussing through criticisms regarding the emotional ethics of postmodern irony. (2) A discussion of Frederic Jameson's concept of "Depthlessness" as a metaphor for fragmentary nature of the postmodern experience, and architecture that uses manipulation of surface to express Depthlessness.

I. SELFLESSNESS

"The only sure affirmation is that negation which begins all ironic play — "this affirmation must be rejected" — leaving the possibility, and in infinite ironies the clear implication, that since the universe (or at least the universe of discourse) is inherently absurd, all statements are subject to ironic undermining. No statement can really "mean what it says"⁹⁸

Selflessness as a Virtue

The negation of irony stems from the absence of affirmation in ironic communication. What irony says, it always says indirectly. Although irony comes in many forms, discussions of irony often open with the generic definition of irony as "saying what is contrary to what is meant"⁹⁹, which is then refined to address various forms of irony. As we've seen, the 'antiphrastic substitution'¹⁰⁰ of irony can manifest as dissimulation, double voicing, or fence-sitting. But ultimately, all these forms of irony dance around the truth; meaning is never conveyed directly. For example, Socrates' ironist was called an Eiron, a term which derived from the word *Eironiea*, which means to dissemble. The New Critics also saw irony as a form of dissemblance. They understood poetic form — that is, the words and the sentences in a poem — to be constructed of hidden meanings. For the New Critics, the reader was to enter a state of "ambiguity" before reconstructing meaning. For Socrates, the interlocutor was to enter a state of "aporia" before realizing the limits of their rhetoric. These traditions justify the indirectness of irony as the communication of truth that can only be spoken through a "hidden" language.

Richard Rorty's Liberal Ironist

⁹⁸ Booth, *A rhetoric of irony*, 127.

⁹⁹ Colebrook, *Irony*, 18–19.

¹⁰⁰ Hutcheon, *Irony's edge*, 12.

“a character who struggles to shape his destiny into a meaningful pattern while he continues to believe that distinctions of good and evil are relative, nothing is forbidden, no fixed ethical standards exist. The mind is its own heaven and hell. The world can be viewed from a bewildering multiplicity of perspectives, but these cannot be brought into harmonious unity.”¹⁰¹

In the concept of the ironic personality, the hidden or implicit nature of ironic communication, manifests as a withdrawal of the self. The ironic personality suppresses their beliefs, desires, and biases. This concept of irony as a personality originated from the character of the Socratic Ironist who employed irony not only as a mode of speech but as a personality built upon understatement and skepticism.¹⁰²In the 20th Century, the ironic character has been posited as a foundation for numerous models of civic participation. I will be discussing specifically philosopher Richard Rorty’s concept of the ironist as a model of liberal participation. Rorty’s ironist is most relevant for my purposes due to its focus on the contingency of language in a postmodern context.

The first condition Rorty assigns to the ironist is that: “(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered”¹⁰³Like the Socratic Ironist, Rorty believes that thinking, knowing, and speaking are complicit with language – a belief along the same vein as Derrida’s adage “there is no outside-text”. Thus, the ironist distance from one’s own beliefs – understanding that they are provisional, contingent, and not equal to truth itself – and is guarded against the complacency which commonly held truths and platitudes may encourage.

Rorty also sees this skepticism as a way of relating to the world. By devaluing the worth of one’s own knowledge, the ironist becomes more open to accepting and cooperating with those who hold views different from theirs. This spirit of collaboration encourages a set of liberal values which include “respect for pluralism, open-mindedness, experimentalism and support of the democratic process.”¹⁰⁴It is a vision of emotional empathy for the distress of others: “to see strange people as fellow sufferers”¹⁰⁵¹⁰⁶ This communal feature of Rorty’s

¹⁰¹ Glicksberg, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, 14.

¹⁰² Colebrook, *Irony*, 6.

¹⁰³ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Bacon, “Rorty, Irony and the Consequences of Contingency for Liberal Society,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 43, no. 9 (2017): 956, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453716688365>.

¹⁰⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, xvi.

¹⁰⁶ Brent J. Steele, “Irony, Emotions and Critical Distance,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 1 (2010): 101, accessed September 30, 2019,

ironist has also been linked to model of cosmopolitan virtue, which embraces global solidarity, but is against a global homogeneity and advocates instead for a solidarity in shared difference.¹⁰⁷ A similar notion of “unity in variety” can be seen in Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Venturi posed the question, rhetorically, of whether the typical Main Street, with its abundance of signs, broken formal rhythms and semantic discordancy, was in fact, “almost all right”?¹⁰⁸ Scully in the introduction to *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* attributed Venturi’s approval of Main Street as a signal of a humanistic vision – one that I argue is similar to Rorty’s vision of ironic liberal solidarity, although Venturi expressed “unity and variety” as primarily an urbanistic and formal concept.

Rorty’s second condition for the ironist is: “(2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts [the limitations of her own vocabulary]”¹⁰⁹ Rorty’s ironist is not only aware of the contingency of her vocabulary, but also that any justifications of that vocabulary are also bound to the vocabulary itself.

“For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer a redescription save a to re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original. Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture - for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies.”¹¹⁰

Here we get a re-interpretation of Socrates’ notion of a continuing doubt in which one is not only skeptical of vocabulary, but also meta-vocabularies which seek to justify vocabularies. Thus, Rorty understands justification and criticism as simply description layered upon description ad infinitum. Socrates performs this continuing doubt through Socratic questioning. Rorty sees this continuing doubt more as a process of constant self-reconstruction.¹¹¹ Rather than adopting a coherent and singular sense of self, the ironist is

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829810373161>, <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/0305829810373161>.

¹⁰⁷ William Smith, “Cosmopolitan Citizenship: Virtue, Irony and Worldliness,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 10, no. 1 (2007): 39, accessed October 5, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006068755>.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form / Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), 9.

¹⁰⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 73.

¹¹⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 80.

¹¹¹ Simon Gottschalk, “Uncomfortably Numb: Countercultural Impulses in the Postmodern Era,” *Symbolic Interaction* 16, no. 4 (1993), accessed October 16, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1993.16.4.351>.

formed by “a bundle of conflicting ‘quasi-selves’,¹¹² and a multilingual fluency formed by “heterogenous knowledge”.¹¹³This second condition also alludes to a cognizance for the intertextual nature of vocabularies. The strategies of intertextuality mentioned in the previous chapter attempt to partially ameliorate this issue of circular reference by displaying this process of “re-re-description”.

And the third condition of Rorty’s ironist is a recapitulation of the first two conditions: “(3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one’s way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.”¹¹⁴

Selflessness as Fragmentation

Although Rorty saw the ironic figure in a predominantly positive light, the ironic identity has often been regarded as inimical to forming a cohesive conception of the self. The postmodern ironic subject is contrasted to the modernist subject, “a finite and predictable entity displaying consistency with itself and others across situations and time.”¹¹⁵The ironist’s insistence on self-recreation assures that the one must be changing through a Socratic like process of continuous doubt. The postmodern ironic is also contrasted to a Heroic concept of self, who senses a calling towards a greater purpose, a commitment to adventure, and the struggle for glory and fame – narratives that are less relevant for the ironist.¹¹⁶In particular, Frederic Jameson considered the de-privatization of self – what Rorty saw an opening up to community – as akin to losing your fingerprint, something that sets you apart as a unique individual.

The postmodern ironic subject is also characterized by an inability to summon up emotion when it is necessary. Ironic distance encourages level headed participation often at the cost of remaining “objective” in situations that may not benefit from it. Hutcheon mentions such an example in the criticisms against South African novelist, J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe* which was praised for its engagement of apartheid and racial inequality but

¹¹² Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 45.

¹¹³ Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 55.

¹¹⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 73.

¹¹⁵ Gottschalk, “Uncomfortably Numb: Countercultural Impulses in the Postmodern Era”

¹¹⁶ Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 58; Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 54; Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 60.

criticized for its ironic engagement which fails to capture the severity of the situation.¹¹⁷The meta-commentary of irony inevitably glosses over the particularities of experiences that are private and subjective in nature. I consider many of the ironic treatments of the topic of history in architecture to be vulnerable to this same criticism. For example, Hans Hollein's façade in Strada Novissima, which I discussed in the previous chapter, reflects insight into the historical contingency of style in architecture, but we must ask whether that matters for, for example, the victims of gentrification or colonial expansion who face losing their homes, history, and cultural identity. This weakness of irony has also been interpreted as a form of complicity, which is ultimately unavoidable in ironic "double-voicing".

These implications can be expanded to general criticisms of irony's emotional ethics.¹¹⁸Just as the virtuous ironist is aware of the contingency of their beliefs, the audience of irony is subject to this same uncertainty. Irony refuses its audience a participation in "innocent mimesis", whereby one fully engages meaning with the assumption that it is true.¹¹⁹This emotional distance came to define the postmodern cultural climate. Literary Critic James Wood criticized the prevalence in postmodern literature for its parodic distance: "The DeLilloan idea of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer - a cultural theorist, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry"¹²⁰ Regarded "as chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction",¹²¹ DeLillo and authors like him raise the question of whether the work of literature is to perform meta-commentary at the loss of an unobstructed engagement with emotion. Similarly, De Man, described the postmodern personality as someone who "read[s] pictures, rather than... imagine[s] meaning"¹²². Jameson describes the cultural pathology of "modernism as primarily alienation, whereas postmodernism is one of fragmentation."¹²³caused by the "death of the subject itself -- the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual"¹²⁴ But Jameson also notes that the emotional vacuum does not lead to no emotion at all, but rather a "a peculiar kind of euphoria" where all is "free-floating and impersonal"¹²⁵These accounts suggest that irony liberates from the limits

¹¹⁷ Hutcheon, *Irony's edge*, 29.

¹¹⁸ Hutcheon, *Irony's edge*, 14.

¹¹⁹ Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* / Nicoline Timmer, *Postmodern studies*, 0923-0483 44 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 25.

¹²⁰ James Wood, "Tell Me How Does It Feel?," <https://www.facebook.com/theguardian>, accessed October 5, 2019.

¹²¹ Wood, "Tell me how does it feel?"

¹²² Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 10.

¹²³ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, 21.

¹²⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, 22.

¹²⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, 22.

of singular narratives but perhaps leaves in its place listlessness. Similarly, the liberating effects of intertextuality have been criticized for the emotional distance they create. Jameson described the self-reflexive and intertextual features of postmodern historicism as the “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the "neo.””¹²⁶. What was seen as the liberation of historical intertextuality is instead seen as an all-consuming relativity, in which the present is rendered as a spectral echo of the past, attached yet not fully present. Hutcheon identifies this paradox in postmodern architecture: “as in postmodernist architecture, there is always a paradox at the heart of that “post”: irony does indeed mark the difference from the past, but the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm—textually and hermeneutically—the connection with the past.”¹²⁷

II. A DEPTHLESS CULTURE

“Today, despite its major differences [to Socratic irony], ‘postmodern’ irony also has this distancing function: we wear 1980s disco clothing or listen to 1970s country and western music, not because we are committed to particular styles or senses but because we have started to question sincerity and commitment in general; everything is as kitsch and dated as everything the concept of irony else, so all we can do is quote and dissimulate.”¹²⁸

The relationship between the ironic personality and ironic culture is often conceived as reciprocal – the ironic personality as being shaped by an ironic culture. Socrates assumed the ironic personality when Ancient Greece underwent imperial expansion, transforming what was a closed community to a heterogeneous polis; his doubt for received wisdom arose from unstable politics and a sudden multiplication of viewpoints. Claire Colebrook described the postmodern ironist to be formed by a similar cultural condition. The postmodern subject is skeptical of “sincerity and commitment... everything is kitsch and dated”. Thus, the postmodern ironist engages culture at a distance.

Marxist cultural theorist Frederic Jameson characterized the fragmented state of postmodern culture through the metaphor of “Depthlessness” which he illustrates in a comparison between Van Gogh’s Peasant Shoes, and Warhol’s Diamond Dust Shoes. In Van Gogh’s painting, the mundane subject of the peasant shoe is sought to be elevated or idealized. In contrast Warhol’s print depicts shoes in the form of a photographic negative, appearing as if run through an x-ray, there is also the emphasis on the disturbing

¹²⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, 23.

¹²⁷ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 125.

¹²⁸ Colebrook, *Irony*, 2–3.

contradiction of the photographic image – the faithful mimicry of life, yet also the dispassionate act of capturing a photograph, in this case, heightened through its clinical connotations.

Whereas Van Gogh seeks to inject life into the lifeless, Warhol withdraws life from the subject by focusing on the alienating effects of mechanical reproduction. This theme of Depthlessness can be understood as the intersection of two phenomena: (1) The severing between form and meaning through commodified reproduction – in this case, the shoe is “dehumanized” through documentation and categorization, “shorn of their earlier life world as the pile of shoes left over from Auschwitz or the remainders and tokens of some incomprehensible and tragic fire in a packed dance hall”¹²⁹ and (2) what is left over, the pile of “dead” images whose original subject is lost.

Depthless Surfaces

In architecture, this metaphor of Depthlessness has been expressed through expressions of surface, specifically through the relationship between the surface and the object. Architects have long had their ideas about how a façade should fit on a building. For example, in *Principle of Cladding*, architect Adolf Loos proposes that the architect should conceive of the space first, then match the space with a suitable surface material. Surfaces should also reflect the material they sit on; “every material possesses its own language of forms” which must be followed. Such ideas date as far back to Vitruvius in the *Ten Books on Architecture*, in which he denounces the painting of materials on other materials and the illustration of implausible imagery of Pompeian wall painting such as slender trees holding up ceilings and human figures rising from tree roots. For the Modernists, the adherence between surface and building become particularly imperative, their view being that both (theoretically) should be subsumed to purely functional and formal applications which were understood to be literal manifestations of scientific progress or the zeitgeist.

What these ideas suggest is that there has been a long-standing convention that the unity between surface and “architecture” – typically understood to be comprised of function and form – is attributed to the expression of truth, whereas the independence of the surface is associated with lying. Art historian Ernst Gombrich locates the origins of this convention in classical rhetoric, specifically the Socrates’ concern for the oratory practices of Sophists who he felt relied too much on verbal ingenuity such that it inhibited one’s ability to discern the truthfulness of their speech. A group of purists, called the Atticists, stood against the Sophist tradition, instead advocating for a more stripped down, less adorned style of speech, which

¹²⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, 18.



Figure 3.2
A Pair of Shoes by Vincent Van Gogh, 1886.

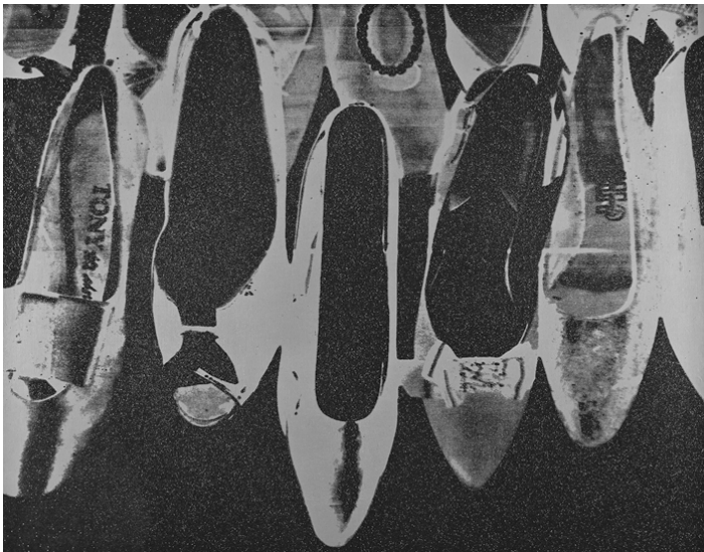


Figure 3.3
Diamond Dust Shoes by Andy Warhol, 1980.

they believed, was also more honest. This encompasses the notion of decorum, a “proper” form of presentation for a given subject. The notion of ornamental decorum also comes from this tradition, thus the attribution of lying to ornament that departs from the limits of “decorum” whatever it may be in a given context.¹³⁰In the following pages, I will be discussing projects in which the integrity of the surface – its adherence to function and form – is intentionally jeopardized to evoke the sense of disenchantment that is attributed to the metaphor of Depthlessness in postmodern culture.

Arbitrary and Differential: SITE’s Best Stores

SITE’s Best Stores, a series of shopping centers, the first of which was built in 1975, approached the design of the commercial program by, contradictorily, highlighting the alienating and disorienting nature of postmodern consumer culture. The designs express numerous features of “Depthlessness”, specifically, the notion of an arbitrary cultural sphere and a sense of impending cultural apocalypse.

The theme of arbitrariness is most evident in the preliminary design exercise of the BEST Stores. A blank shopping center is “dressed up” with facades of various styles. SITE’s conclusion was that none of the “high cultural artifacts” – genre specific, aesthetic objects in the strictest sense – were suitable for the shopping center. In relation to the concept of ornamental decorum, it could be said that there is no appropriate way of expressing meaning in this scenario. The surface is inevitably something other than the building itself, thus arbitrary and also deceptive.

SITE’s depiction aligns with how arbitrariness is described in postmodern discourses as a source of alienation in consumer culture. Jameson used the term “multi-phrenic intensities” to describe the pathological fragmentation that occurs when the subject seeks to identify with a system of signs and images that cannot be integrated into a coherent identity.¹³¹The nature of this cultural fragmentation can be understood more clearly if seen in relation to similar concepts in post-structuralist semiotics:

“the other thrust of structuralism has been to try to dispel the old conception of language as taming (e.g., God gave Adam language in order to name the beasts and plants in the Garden), which involves a one-to-one correspondence between a signifier and a signified. Taking a structural view, one comes quite rightly to feel that sentences don't work that way: we don't translate the individual signifiers or words that make up a sentence back into their signifieds on a one-to-one basis. Rather, we

¹³⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order* 9 (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979), 19.

¹³¹ Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 44.

read the whole sentence, and it is from the interrelationship of its words or signifiers that a more global meaning - now called a "meaning-effect" - is derived. The signified - maybe even the illusion or the mirage of the signified and of meaning in general - is an effect produced by the inter-relationship of material signifiers."¹³²

What Jameson is describing is the emphasis in Deconstruction and Poststructuralism on the notion of the "arbitrary" and "differential" relationship between words and their meanings. Structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued that language was formed by a signifier, a word, and a related signified, the idea to be conveyed by the word. He also noted that the relationship between the word and the idea it represents is arbitrary, that is, they are not related in an intrinsic way. Although, as anthropologist Levi Strauss noted, "the sign is arbitrary a priori but ceases to be arbitrary a posteriori – after the sign has come into historical existence it cannot be arbitrarily changed."¹³³; the signifier and sign relationship is arbitrary but is fixed because words obviously mean something, thus, within a social and cultural framework, signifiers do have relatively stable relationship to what they signify. Saussure also considered the meaning of words to be differential. Words mean something because they don't mean other things. The word "dog" means dog because dog does not mean cat, or canine, etc.

But these two features began to be emphasized in Post-structuralism, notably by Jacques Derrida. Increasingly it was felt that 'the individual word or sentence that 'stands for' or 'reflects' the individual object or event in the real world, but rather that the entire system of signs, the entire field of the langue, lies parallel to reality itself.'¹³⁴It was this discrepancy between representation and presentation in language that caused the Poststructuralists to question the ability of the text to convey meaning in any true sense; if 'in principle any signifier could represent any signified'¹³⁵ it is untenable to conceive that there is any stable or singular meaning behind one's utterances. Like Socratic Ironist, this view argues that we are bound to clichés and aphorisms - that everything has "always already" been uttered.

Features of this "de-centered" conception of language were observed in consumer culture. It was thought that the system of signs and images of postmodern culture were "free-floating", parallel to meaning. The postmodern subject, who seeks to make meaning out of such a culture is thus forced to responses that range from "vigorous denial to compensatory

¹³² Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 7.

¹³³ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics / Daniel Chandler*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0668/2006024738-d.html>, 27.

¹³⁴ Chandler, *Semiotics*, 19.

¹³⁵ Chandler, *Semiotics*, 23.

nostalgia to sarcastic nihilism”¹³⁶Different theorists have attributed different causes to this de-centering. For example, philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard argued that postmodern culture was in a state of “hyperreality”, in which cultural images and signs have dominated the cultural sphere, yet they don’t point to any real-world object. Some theorists allude to the notion of cultural rationalization, where cultural and social relationships have become reduced to commodified exchanges, thus absorbed into the consumer realm.¹³⁷

Due to the sheer mass of mass media today, we can see the effects of this “hyperreality” even more pronouncedly than Baudrillard had envisioned. Particularly in light of the events of the past decade – from the Arab Spring to Cambridge Analytica –technology and mass media have demonstrated to be both entrenched in the fabric of reality, yet exhibiting a life of its own, making the navigation of contemporary life disorienting. The fact that our time has been called the era of Post-Truth only affirms how deeply technology has disrupted the means through which people have conventionally perceived reality. The liberation of the sign from the referent allows us to explore new grounds, yet that separation leads to an alienation of its own kind. Jameson compared this confusion to the symptoms of schizophrenia, where the real and imaginary overlap sporadically, impeding one’s clear sense of everyday life:

“I remember very well the day it happened. We were staying in the country and I had gone for a walk alone as I did now and then. Suddenly, as I was passing the school, I heard a German song; the children were having a singing lesson. I stopped to listen, and at that instant a strange feeling came over me, a feeling hard to analyze but akin to something I was to know too well later- a disturbing sense of unreality. It seemed to me that I no longer recognized the school, it had become as large as a barracks; the singing children were prisoners, compelled to sing. It was as though the school and the children's song were apart from the rest of the world. At the same time my eye encountered a field of wheat whose limits I could not see. The yellow vastness, dazzling in the sun, bound up with the song of the children imprisoned in the smooth stone school-barracks, filled me with such anxiety that I broke into sobs. I ran home to our garden and began to play "to make things seem as they usually were; that is, to return to reality. It was the first appearance of those elements which were always present in later sensations of unreality: illimitable vastness, `brilliant light, and the gloss and smoothness of material things. (Renee Sechehaye, *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl.*)”¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Shane Gunster, “All About Nothing”:: Difference, Affect, and Seinfeld,” *Television & New Media* 6, no. 2 (2005): 205, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476404274387>.

¹³⁷ Gunster, “All about Nothing”:: Difference, Affect, and Seinfeld,” 202.

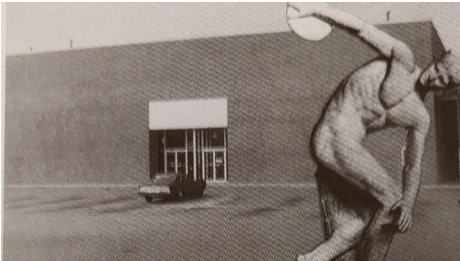
¹³⁸ Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 8.



Figure 3.4
BEST Stores, "Facade Brick Pile" by SITE, 1975.



Time Tested



Classical



Blowup

Figure 3.5
Preliminary Studies for the Facade of BEST Stores, "Facade Brick Pile" by SITE, 1975.

In response to the conclusions deduced from the preliminary exercises, the façade of the BEST Stores depicts a scene of physical ruin in the form of crumbling structures and peeling surfaces. Surfaces are expressed as redundant, in the case of the *Façade Brick Pile*, the wall crumbles, revealing that it encloses nothing. This Depthlessness we have thus far described has also been attributed with the notion of a cultural apocalypse where all social ties eventually dissolve into a mass of meaningless signs.

“Typical response to the showroom has been to interpret it as a symbol of apocalypse and/or as destruction - or, as proposed by the French critic Pierre Schneider, "The new American pessimism". These metaphors are implied, but the intended dialogue is primarily concerned with missing parts, with the gap between the know and the void, with equivocation versus expectation as a source for urban imagery.”¹³⁹

“The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the "crisis" of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called Postmodernism. The case for its existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or *coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s.”¹⁴⁰

Wines describes the ironic approach of the Best Stores in particularly grim terms: “If you cannot retain a certain amount of objectivity about or distance from what's going on in the world and approach it with humor, you risk going over the edge of sanity. One cannot possibly accept the "serious" world as being truly serious... because if you can't laugh, you commit suicide.”¹⁴¹This sardonic and hopeless type of humor is characteristic of the ironic character; Russian poet Alex Block described the “symptoms” of irony as, “fits of an exhausting laughter which starts with a diabolical mockery and a provocative smile and ends as rebellion and sacrilege.”¹⁴²The ironic is forced to face the inescapability of nihilism by laughing at it. Unlike for Socrates or Rorty who saw emotional distance as a virtue, for Wines’ distance is merely an escape from the impossibility of authentic action and a refuge from the emotional toll of nihilism. Here, we see the most negative implications of the ironic postmodern subject. Wines’ irony has no lofty goal of global solidarity or objectivity, it merely becomes a way to face meaninglessness without feeling meaningless. SITE’s message

¹³⁹ Steve Womersley, *SITE: Identity in Density / [Edited by Steve Womersley]*, The master architect series 6 (Mulgrave, Vic.: Images, 2005), 45.

¹⁴⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, 13.

¹⁴¹ Emmanuel Petit, *Irony, Or, the Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

¹⁴² Glucksberg, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, 3.

could be said to be a statement on the decrepitude of consumer culture, but more specifically, it is also a demonstration of the distanced engagement that is necessary to survive in it.

“In such an environment, many grow unwilling (and unable) to maintain long-term patterns of cognitive and emotional investment in differences that have been produced, appropriated, and infiltrated by a marketing machine that has become ubiquitous. As the attachment, detachment, and reattachment of signifiers to an endless parade of commodity signifieds becomes ever more rapid and pervasive, a contemptuous and apathetic attitude toward all practices of signifying difference becomes more widespread.”¹⁴³

Learning from the Hyperreality of Las Vegas

Learning from Las Vegas, Venturi and Scott Brown’s study of kitsch in the architecture of the Vegas Strip, celebrates the “Depthlessness” of the post-industrial consumerist landscape without the apprehension we see in Wines, and interprets architectural features we see present in the BEST stores of SITE as progressive rather than apocalyptic. The way they have formulated their positive appraisal of Depthlessness is of particular interest, specifically seen within the context of the broader discussion of Hyperreality. Professor of urbanism and architecture Clara Izarabal suggests that “people's fascination with the urban iconography of *hyperkitsch* stems in part from their alienation from their real cities.”¹⁴⁴The Vegas Strip exhibits with heightened intensity many of the negative impacts of globalization and post-industrial consumer culture specifically the deterioration of a sense of place. Learning from Las Vegas is essentially a refutation against this largely negative understanding of hyperreal urbanity in Vegas. I will be comparing these two contrasting views in the following pages.

Venturi and Scott Brown’s views align with what one would expect from a Rortyan Ironist. Like Rorty, they considered the separation between truth and representation to be inevitable; they also encouraged a mode of conduct that embraces rather than avoids this discrepancy between truth and representation. This can be seen in their embrace of the Depthlessness that Wines saw as a sign of cultural apocalypse. The architecture of Vegas, like the BEST Stores, is the epitome of a Depthless architecture. Surfaces are disconnected from the building’s formal and functional features. Facades are attached onto buildings as a separate skin often in the form of large signs which bear no relation to the building. This

¹⁴³ Gunster, “All about Nothing”:: Difference, Affect, and Seinfeld,” 204.

¹⁴⁴ Shelton Waldrep, *The Dissolution of Place: Architecture, Identity, and the Body* / Shelton Waldrep, Ashgate studies in architecture series (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 13; Clara Irazábal, “KITSCH IS DEAD, LONG LIVE KITSCH: THE PRODUCTION of" HYPERKITSCH" in LAS VEGAS,” *Journal of architectural and planning research*, 2007, accessed October 16, 2019.

disconnect also manifests at the urban scale; typical expressions of local culture and local identity in the urban fabric are absent, and instead replaced by the depiction of distant times and places. But before looking at how Venturi and Scott Brown justify such an architecture, it is necessary to understand the broader discussion on Hyperreality.

Hyperreality and Globalization

These features of the Vegas Strip exemplify the disconnect between architecture and local culture that was observed to be the result of globalization and the emergence of consumer culture. This phenomenon of Hyperreality consists primarily of two concurrent phenomena: (1) The replacing of local cultural expression by a culture sphere formed by the global consumer market. (2) The sanitization and commercialization of local and foreign cultural expressions. These two phenomena combined led to the simultaneous “obliteration of cultural differences” and the emergence of a commercialized or simulated form of cultural heterogeneity. The first phenomenon refers to the waning of “local” culture – the “common repository of myths, heroes, events, landscapes, and memories”¹⁴⁵ between the individuals that make up the nation-state, also generally known as national culture, “nationalism”, or “localism”.¹⁴⁶ With the onset of globalization, these local cultural relationships are replaced with a culture formed by trans-national cultural relationships which are referred to as “third cultures”.¹⁴⁷ But rather than leading to a universal solidarity between different cultures, the expression of the urban fabric has become increasingly homogenous across different cities in the world:

“cultural and subcultural uniqueness seems to be slowly but inexorably decreasing, or in some cases becoming stylized in ways that bear little resemblance to traditional cultural patterns. Music is increasingly becoming world music. Food is increasingly succumbing to an international cuisine. Clothing styles are becoming a pastiche of worldwide influences. Our heroes are decreasingly likely to be local and increasingly likely to be selected from around the globe. Our shopping malls, franchise outlets, hotels, airports, banks, and gambling casinos are quickly becoming indistinguishable, whether they are in Australia, Europe, Asia, or the Americas”¹⁴⁸

Hyperreality and Cultural Commodification

¹⁴⁵ Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 109.

¹⁴⁶ Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 109

¹⁴⁷ Featherstone, *Undoing culture*, 114.

¹⁴⁸ Russell W. Belk, “Hyperreality and Globalization,” *Journal of International Consumer Marketing* 8, 3-4 (1996): 27, accessed October 16, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1300/J046v08n03_03.

The second phenomenon refers to the commodified and stylized nature of this globally homogenous culture. Rather than being derived from a nation's culture, this new global culture is primarily formed by the demands of the consumer market and is characterized by a greater emphasis on "efficiency, predictability, calculability, substitution of non-human for human technology and control over uncertainty."¹⁴⁹ In addition to this, whatever existing culture that remains is packaged and "redeployed as commodity signifiers".¹⁵⁰ Jean Baudrillard presents Disneyland as a prime example of this Hyperreal environment. Existing local culture is replaced by a "scripted" space that is designed to draw in a wider audience, and whatever local symbolism remains is distorted into a commodified form.

"As Anna Kingman notes: By addressing topics such as drama and ambience as vital ingredients of theming, the scripted spaces of Disney express at once the enormous potential of social inclusion and the staging of diverse activities but also, to an equal extent, the danger of exclusivity and homogenization. Another danger of privately financed scripted spaces lies clearly in the distorted representation of place, as local, production-based connotations are deliberately replaced by universally recognized consumption-based meanings that appeal to a broad customer base. Such controlled environments are safe, familiar, and comfortable, entertaining yet homogenized to accommodate a commonly accepted standard. Local symbolism is used only to flavor the otherwise universal product."¹⁵¹

Like Disneyland, Vegas appropriates the images of different cities, "conveniently located and hygienically packaged, detached from the troublesome aspects of real urban life", and redeploys them as sites tailored for consumption. However, Venturi and Scott Brown saw these manifestations of hyperreality in Las Vegas as a positive phenomenon: "there is no reason why the methods of commercial persuasion... should not serve the purpose of civic and cultural enhancement."¹⁵²

The signage of the Vegas Strip is the epitome of the detached facades characteristic of a Depthless architecture. The façade of the building contributes purely as a sign, not with any relation to the architectural form and function. Rather than seeing the detached sign in negative terms, Venturi and Scott Brown take a position similar to Rorty's ironist, asserting that there is no way for architectural representation to be the pure expression of form and function. Even Modern architecture which was theoretically presumed to be the pure embodiment of form and function was based on contemporary "art movements and the

¹⁴⁹ George Ritzer, "The "McDonaldization" of Society," *The Journal of American Culture* 6, no. 1 (1983): 100, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1983.0601_100.x.

¹⁵⁰ Gunster, "All about Nothing":: Difference, Affect, and Seinfeld," 202–3.

¹⁵¹ Waldrep, *The dissolution of place*, 17.

¹⁵² Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 6.

industrial vernacular”.¹⁵³According to this viewpoint, architectural appearance inevitably an act of mimesis, a representation of another representation of what is true or essential. For example, Venturi and Scott Brown observe that a modernist building like Crawford Manor designed by Paul Rudolph, only looks “high tech” and progressive, yet it is ordinary and mundane. Venturi and Scott Brown don’t go as far as to deny all possibility of conveying “truth” in architecture, however, their views do suggest some inevitable discrepancy between architectural appearance and architectural “essence”(however one wish may define it) - a stance taken similarly by architectural historian Colin Rowe who described an inevitable discrepancy between “*physique* (form) and *morale* (meaning) of modern architecture”.¹⁵⁴

Justifications of Hyperreality

Venturi and Scott Brown not only assert that architecture is bound to the sign, but the use of the sign embraces the new communicative requirements of the time. He compares the signs of Vegas to the signs in an airport which are required for someone to navigate the large and complex space. Similarly, speed in Vegas comes into play as the signs are meant to be viewed while travelling in an automobile. The necessity for the sign can also be understood at a greater scale – that of the changing needs of a society that is becoming faster and larger in which the manipulation of space alone cannot accommodate for. Venturi’s evaluation of non-spatial features runs contrary to that of Loos’ in *Ornament in Crime* which described signs and symbols as things to be done away with as humankind evolves into a more culturally and intellectually advanced state; Venturi’s analogy portrays Depthlessness – in this case, literally as flat signage – as a reflection of the newfound complexity of society in the 21st century. This is increasingly true today as architectural images are predominantly mediated on the web in the form of rendered images. The demand for an iconic and immediately legible form has grown substantially, particularly over the last decade.

"The movement from a view of life as essentially simple and orderly to a view of life as complex and ironic is what every individual passes through in becoming mature. But certain epochs encourage this development; in them the paradoxical or dramatic outlook colors the whole intellectual scene... Amid simplicity and order rationalism is born, but rationalism proves inadequate in any period of upheaval. Then equilibrium must be created out of opposites. Such inner peace as men gain must represent a tension among contradictions and uncertainties... A feeling for paradox allows

¹⁵³ Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 11.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Eisenman et al., *Five Architects*. Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3.

seemingly dissimilar things to exist side by side, their very incongruity suggesting a kind of truth."¹⁵⁵

Learning from Las Vegas provides an alternative view to the alienating qualities of consumer culture and seeks to resolve the difficulties it poses for the postmodern subject. Rather than seeing the primacy of the image as a by-product of cultural deterioration, Venturi and Scott Brown propose that one should embrace the immediacy of its communication and its integral role in the more diverse and connected interactions that define the global culture. Like Rorty's Ironist, embracing the distance between representation and truth can allow for the accommodation for a greater diversity of views and a solidarity in plurality. However, Venturi and Scott Brown's analysis of the Vegas Strip is, as they admit, largely limited to the analysis of architectural communication; they leave the complexities implicated in the ethics of hyperreal architecture out of the picture. As I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, this limitation suffices for my purposes, as I am primarily focused on the allegorical quality of Depthless architecture.

Conclusion

"The despair arises because the ironic hero must fight in vain, and he knows that he fights in vain, against an adversary who never loses and yet who is blindly indifferent to the outcome. Time ends, life is overthrown, the hero goes down to his eternal resting place, the absurd triumphs. The great game with Chance is rigged; this is the dark truth which the ironic hero discovers for himself. There is no "higher" reality. Language is but a cry meant to shatter the silence of the starry spaces, but it is silence that conquers in the end. This is the nihilism, the metaphysical source of irony, against which he openly or secretly revolts, for his vision of the absurd is in itself absurd; it cannot be lived."¹⁵⁶

Irony is not always used a tool to forward a specific goal; it also possesses the value of an alluring fiction regardless of the veracity of the ironic statement. This explains its use outside of the context of dissent or criticism. However, rather than seeing these two modes of irony as distinct, I argue that irony's fictional resonance could certainly be present even if it is not being presented as pure fiction. The emotional resonance of an argument will inevitably make its way into any use of irony, and thus, any of the ironic narratives described this chapter would to some extent be applicable to the other uses of irony I have described in the previous chapters.

¹⁵⁵ Venturi, *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*.

¹⁵⁶ Glucksberg, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, 23.

The ironic allegory also raises troublesome implications of how one perceives the ironist. The narrative of ironic fiction suggests that the allure of the ironic personality is not in their ability to conquer contradictions, but their persistence against contradiction despite the inevitability of them succumbing to it. This can be seen in the archetypical ironic story, the Tragic Irony of the Greek Tragedies. The protagonist suffers at the hands of the Gods who at times behave without reason, but ultimately it is the unavoidable hubris of the protagonist that leads them their demise. All in all, it is a world that is just but unreasonable, the protagonist both morally flawed but innocent because his fate is to be blind to his own error.

The format of the ironic narrative may vary depending on the author, but it is inevitably a story in which the protagonist does not conquer but is consumed by contradictions, it is a story of someone who struggles against a battle we know they will lose. The appeal of projects like SITE's Best Stores, and Venturi and Scott Brown's vision of Vegas likely stem from their capturing of this ironic narrative by proposing an attitude that fully embraces the contradictions between truth and expression in postmodern culture even though they may be unresolvable contradictions. But though the ironic narrative can be emotionally nourishing, compared to the forms of irony discussed in the previous chapters like parody or ironic ambiguity, ironic allegory is comparably ambivalent and unengaged with the subjects it depicts, or rather it simply depicts issues without the hope or desire to change it.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Irony is Double Edged

My intent for this thesis was to draw the relationship between the existing literature on ironic architecture and the broader discourse of irony. The past three chapters have addressed in greater detail three functions of ironic architecture: to express conflict through ambiguous meaning, to propose provisional solutions and to encourage skepticism towards what appears to be common sense, and to serve as an allegory that gives shape to the contradictions and uncertainties felt in daily life.

However, irony always seems to come at a cost. Irony can communicate ambiguous and multiple meanings but does so through compositions that defy conventional meaning and semantic clarity. Thus, the use of ambiguous architectural expression may not always enrich aesthetic experience but taking the viewer out of the experience by impeding their ability to decipher meaning. The use of “double voicing” in parodic irony also comes at the risk of complicity and ambivalence. Both affirming and transgressing the subject of criticism provides the opportunity to assert an ideological stance that is otherwise impossible. However, residing in that liminal space between agreement and dissent also forces the ironist to relegate their own opinion to a subjective one that is no more valid than any other opinion. In the case of ironic allegory, the ironic condition provides a convincing fantasy for coping with the contradictions of daily life, but although it makes an alluring drama out of the condition it does not pose a solution for resolving it.

As Linda Hutcheon stated, irony truly possesses a “cutting edge”; its presence is contiguous to disagreement, frustration, and confusion. But I would modify Hutcheon’s characterization to “double edged”. Irony is a mode of discourse that comes at some major cost to parties apart from irony’s target. This cost of irony is likely what causes many to disapprove of ironic architecture, which I agree with. I don’t think that irony should be the first tool the architect reaches for in the process of design.

“The ironist is crucified on the cross of irony that he has built with his own hands. He does not choose irony, as a matter of fact; it chooses him. It is true that spiritual ironists are sick souls; they suffer and can find no cure for their suffering. But the reason, according to one critic of the ironic vision, ‘that the ironist's soul is sick is that he has visions of a better world than the existing one, and the destruction of present evil gives opportunity for future good. Hence the estate of irony is honorable even though its existence is evidence of the terrible imperfection of human life.’¹⁵⁷

But I have found that the study of ironic architecture is valuable if one sees irony not a useful design tool but as a response to crises. “Irony emerges as part of a *Weltanschauungstragödie* of a particular kind; it arises from the perception that there is no way out of the trap of life and yet the unheroic hero must struggle to discover a meaning and a way.”¹⁵⁸ Irony is a persistence against insurmountable odds, it is not a victory over it. But though ironic architecture doesn't solve the problems it faces, it does give form to cultural anxieties and uncertainties – which is something valuable in its own right.

A Future of Sincerity

It is hard to say how irony will develop in the coming years as its recent developments have been largely unprecedented. But author of *Irony; or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture* Emmanuel Petit believes that the future of irony will be more sincere. He argues that there will emerge in architecture of what is akin to the New Sincerity Movement in literature. Generally thought to have been conceived in response to the 9/11, the movement called for a “New Sincerity”, to break from the anxious but still detachedly suave irony of postmodernity. A passage from author David Foster Wallace's *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction* – an essay on the effect of television on culture, and new developments in metafiction - is often held as a manifesto of the New Sincerity:

“The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations

¹⁵⁷ Glicksberg, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, 16.

¹⁵⁸ Glicksberg, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, 34.

of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal". To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows."¹⁵⁹

Like the postmodern ironists, Wallace saw sincerity to be bound in what Jameson described as the "prison house of language" – their implication in a "double bind", that "the writer's sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation", "sincerity...[as] the kind of secret that must always break with representation."¹⁶⁰– and he exercised a self-reflexivity to address that. But his writing then turns back on itself by reflecting upon the strains and difficulties of maintaining that self-reflexivity. Hence, authors of the New Sincerity movement are thought bring a sense of humanity back into the meta-fiction of their predecessors.

One of Petit's examples of this New Sincerity Movement in architecture is MVRDV's *Metacity Datatown*. The book envisions a dystopian but prophetic scenario of an intensified form of postmodern hyperreality mixed with the effects of climate change. The 'Global Village' has become the "Metacity", available land for growing food and living is shrinking, and the population is growing. In order for humanity to survive, the city has been reduced to a fine-tuned machine of volumes and blobs, calibrated through an extrapolation of Dutch statistics. MVRDV state that "Datatown...is not a design... It can be seen as a prelude to further explorations into the future of the Metacity, explorations that could induce a necessary round of self-criticism in architecture and urbanism, and even a redefinition of practice." Like the postmodern ironists, MVRDV employs similar motifs as those I described in the previous chapter, and like the parodist "uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges"¹⁶¹, but without the use of humor or indirection.

¹⁵⁹ David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, 1. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), 193.

¹⁶⁰ David Hering, *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 143.

¹⁶¹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3.

Unironic Irony

However, I argue that there are other recent uses of irony in architecture which may refute Petit's prediction of a New Sincerity. One of these is the use of irony in architecture without its critical functions. One such example is MVRDV's Glass Farm which uses the motifs of Depthlessness without the commentary that is typically associated with it. The design consists of a glass volume formed roughly into the shape of a local vernacular farm house - but its dimensions are triple the size - and a photograph composite of the vernacular farm house is printed onto the glass surface. Coprincipal of MVRDV Winy Mass originally wanted to call the project "Ghost Farm", alluding to the hyperreal displacement of the farmhouse with respects to its material, time, and location. This use of unironic use of "Depthlessness" is also present in MVRDV's Crystal Houses which feature bricks of glass, and The Imprint which features a peeling façade – a similar approach to the design of the commercial program as those of SITE's Best Stores.

This uncritical and arguably unironic form of irony has become widespread in contemporary culture. Irony appears to have become naturalized into mainstream culture and has transformed into an object of sincere aesthetic appreciation. For example, in fashion, symbols of conspicuous consumption are appropriated with an ironic self-consciousness but consumed in a way that is sincere. On online communities, all forms of media are parodied, commented upon, exchanged, and parodied again, to the point where these ironic extensions of supposedly "authentic" works have become the new authentic in place of the original work. Irony as we know it today is no longer the skeptical and subversive medium it was.

Optimistic Irony

Irony is also no longer limited to assuming a skeptical position. This can be seen in BIG's Amager Bakke Waste-to-Power Plant which uses the "double voicing" of parodic irony but towards an optimistic rather than a skeptical agenda. In ways similar to the "counter-monument", the ski hill shaped powerplant is a juxtaposition of opposites. Even the motto behind the project, what Bjarke Ingles calls "Hedonistic Sustainability", is an ideology that seeks to blend sustainability and pleasure, which goes against the typical idea of sustainability being achieved through moderation. But perhaps, the building only serves an "illusion...[that] ecological justice...does not require societal change... [and] addresses our ecological predicament by projecting a (symbolic) message into the real, as an attempt to conceal the irreducible gap separating the real [the power plant] from the modes of its

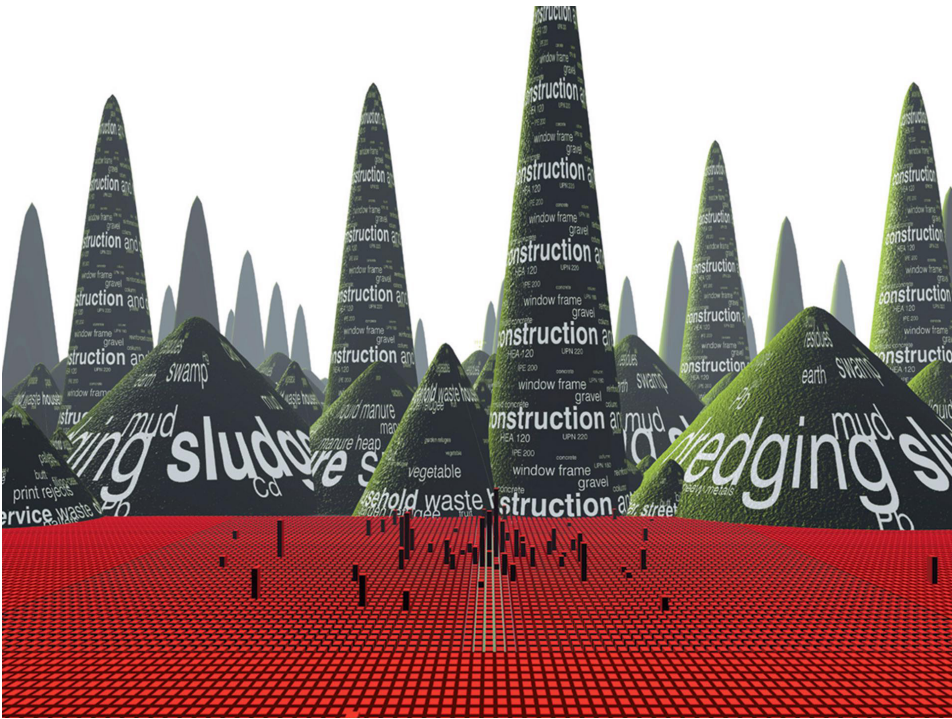


Fig 4.1 Metacity Datatown by MVRDV, 1999.



Fig.4.2 Crystal Houses by MVRDV, 2016.



Fig.4.3 Glass Farm by MVRDV, 2014.



Fig.4.4 The Imprint by MVRDV, 2018.

symbolization”.¹⁶² Like in parody, the Amager Bakke Waste-to-Energy Plant juxtaposes opposites, but not because it is unable to resolve their contradictory relationship, but rather to assert that it has triumphed over said contradiction - that you *can* have it both ways. This type of irony raises significant implications. The potential for deception in irony is only redeemed by its ability to deconstruct ideas and encourage greater skepticism, but if irony is used towards an affirmative function, that balance is thrown off, making such an irony ethically questionable.

Ultimately, irony remains to be a form of communication that carries certain risks which no previous tradition of irony has been exempt from, whether it was Socrates’ use of irony in Ancient Greece or the political satire that has come to characterize contemporary post-truth era politics. But irony has also consistently demonstrated to be uniquely capable of giving form to the imperfect and the unideal. Irony allows us to reason with uncertainty and futility, it also keeps us on guard for imminent crises. It is likely that as long as reality falls short of the ideal, there will always be some place for irony to fill its gaps and thus it would be wise to understand what irony is, how it is used, and if one should use it, to strive to do so responsibly.

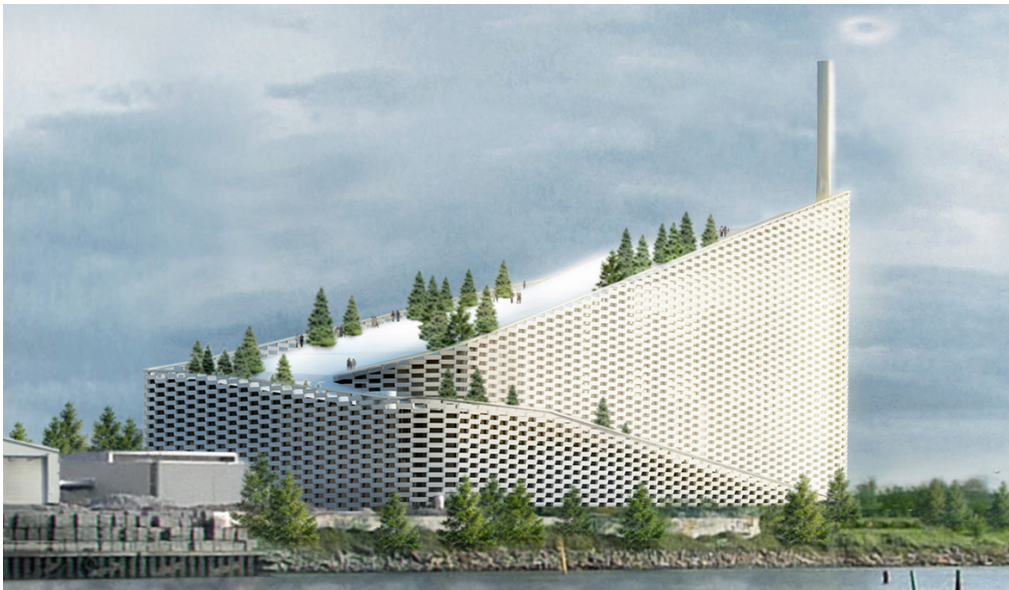


Fig.4.5 Amager Bakke Waste-to-Power Plant by BIG, 2018.

¹⁶² Miguel Eufrosia, “At the Crossroads of Sustainability: The Natural Recompositioning of Architecture,” *Architecture_MPS*, 2018, 14, accessed October 16, 2019.

Additional Thoughts

The conversation that took place during the defence of this thesis raised questions regarding not only the ideas and arguments of the thesis itself but also of my experience of it. I will discuss the latter which may interest those curious to know of my thoughts at the closing of the approximately 1.5 years that took me to finish this thesis.

I have consciously held back the marks of my personal experience and opinion in the making of this thesis, not only because I worried that it would make my arguments too subjective but also for fear of overstepping, what I imagined to be, prescribed limitations on how novel or substantive of an argument I was allowed to make. Evidence of this can be seen in my writing, which pursues arguments but just as a soon revokes them, repeatedly and likely frustratingly for the reader. This was because I was intimidated by the immensity of the topic, of how divisive the responses were to the presentations I delivered in the making of this thesis, and at a subconscious level, due to my awareness of the questioning of character that I think all ironists are subject to. Thus, I sought to avoid that label of the “ironist” which is probably a futile goal for one who writes a thesis on irony. In my defense I have often emphasized that this would be an unironic thesis on irony.

During the defense, my ambivalence was remarked upon, which is nothing new, in fact it has been commented upon by most who have read my thesis. However, amidst the defence, it was remarked that perhaps my ambivalence was not just due to my personal hesitations, but rather a result of me being or becoming ironic in the course of writing this thesis - this I was not expecting, but the probability of the explanation was something I did not find difficult to consider despite the fact that I had consciously been resisting precisely this ironic tone in my writing.

Could it be that like an overly zealous method actor, I had become consumed by my subject? Whether or not this is true, I do indeed find myself thinking the thoughts of those thinkers I have written about in this thesis, simply because I think about them so often. That being said, irony is increasingly something I notice in the attitudes of the people around me, whether it be a defensive irony that diffuses the risk of vulnerable communication, or the subtle wordplay that people often use to say the things we can't say but wish we could. I also more frequently find myself looking for the ironic in the unironic – for the wills, desires, and ideals that we pass off as truths. But in no other places did I look harder for irony than the texts about irony themselves, in particular, what I was writing about irony.

In retrospect, when I began to see the irony in writing about irony, the thesis topic began to turn upon itself- its content began to impinge upon its form, breaking it down into parts that seemed more artificially bound the more I looked at them. I realize now that I had come face to face with the “double-edge” that I argued was central to the concept of irony. Ironic expression seems to undo itself eventually whether or not you are aware of it. I have also noticed that I am not alone in this experience. An ironic tone of writing comes with writing about irony. For example, Venturi’s writing has this quality – I am reminded of his description of the TV antennae on the Guild House.

What to make of all this, I’m not sure, but I do find the idea of meeting your subject of study from the back then in a years time to circle around and meet them at the front a somewhat accurate description of what its been like to write this thesis.

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