

2.1. Dancing the Pool! Devo and postmodernism 1975 - 1980

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the American post-punk band Devo, and the way in which they drew on central tenets of postmodern theory to comment on the rise of corporate capitalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Devo self-consciously constructed a Dadaist aesthetic to comment on ideas about postmodernity, commercialism, and late capitalism in Conservative America. Much of their work is centred on two postmodernist presumptions: that the philosophical subject is under threat, and that parody is fundamental to the notion of postmodernism. This paper explores how Devo's music sits within this context.

Keywords: Devo, post-punk, postmodernism, parody, the subject.

1. Introduction

In much of their musical output from 1975-1980, American post-punk band Devo self-consciously drew on postmodern theory to comment on the rise of global, corporate capitalism in the 1980s (Devo Inc., 2014). Their music explores the retreat from subjectivity, a central tenet of postmodern theory, and comments on the negative impacts this may have on society; the most injurious being the prospect of an "identity crisis". French sociologist and philosopher Michel Foucault (1982), in *The Subject and Power*, writes that the philosophical subject is simultaneously 'subject' to another's control, and attached to an identity position. Devo's work explores this relationship between power and subjectivity, particularly in the track "Corporate Anthem" (1979) released on the album *Duty Now for the Future*; using music and visuals, Devo comment on the fate of subjectivity in a world increasingly controlled by global corporations. The second tenet of postmodern theory often explored within the work of Devo, is the endorsement of parody. The concept of postmodern parody can be traced back to scepticism against decidable origins and causes, found in the work of writers such as French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard (Hebdige, 1998). In *The Precession of Simulacra*, Baudrillard (1998 [1981]) claims that Western society has replaced all reality and meaning with signs and symbols, and that human experience is merely a simulation; what is left is a fascination with icons and mirrors, and a proliferation of sources and readings is celebrated. The concept of postmodern parody is explored within this paper from two central perspectives: firstly, from the perspective of Frederic Jameson (1992), who rejects the notion of parody entirely; and secondly, from the perspective of Linda Hutcheon (1986-87), who believes that parody is fundamental to the concept of postmodernism. Devo's "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" (1978) self-consciously explores the notion of parody in a postmodern context.

2. Identity crisis

In *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, Marxist political theorist Frederic Jameson (1992) writes that today, from two central perspectives, postmodernist theorists are exploring the notion of the

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“Death of the Subject” — that personal identity is a thing of the past. The first perspective argues that in the emergence of the bourgeoisie as a hegemonic social class, there was once such a thing as individualism but today, in the age of corporate capitalism, the old bourgeois individual no longer exists. The second position argues that not only is the bourgeois individual a thing of the past, but it is also a myth; a cultural perplexity designed to persuade people that they once possessed a unique identity. From the perspective of the first standpoint, as the old bourgeois individual breaks down in the rise of corporate capitalism, the bourgeois/proletariat dualism is destabilised, thus decentralising the Western proletariat as the absolute horizon of socialist and technological advance. This destabilisation is further intensified by what British sociologist Dick Hebdige terms the “three negations” which underpin postmodernist theory, all of which involve an attack on Marxism (1998, pp. 374-381). Hebdige’s first negation “against totalisation” underlines the tendency of postmodernist theory to attack the Enlightenment, and any other discourse which advocates collective human goals (1998, pp. 374-376). This includes the rejection of all sociological concepts and modes of enquiry, such as Marxism-Leninism and Hegelianism. This move gathered impetus in the 1960s, and grew from scepticism of political programmes prescribed by an elite. New subjectivities — feminism, non-normative sexualities and gender identities, the counterculture, etc. — could not be accommodated by the older paradigms; people were supposedly free agents, and yet at the same time subject to an authority (Hebdige, 1998). In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, French sociologist and philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1984 [1979]) talks of a suspicion towards metanarratives — religions, sociological concepts, etc. — that make universal claims to reason, insisting that they create a society that listens to some, and ignores others.

For some theorists, however, this destabilisation does not mean that unique identity ceases to exist. In *Postmodernism, Politics and Art*, British historian John Roberts (1990) proposes that there has been a shift in focus from class, to gender, race and sexuality. Romanian-American cultural philosopher Virgil Nemoianu (2010), in *Postmodernism and Cultural Identities*, explores this point further, working from the premise that we are living in a turbulent and uncertain postmodern world, in which the bourgeois individual no longer exists. He posits the question: can anything really function in this fragmentary randomness? He writes:

Any randomness deserves this name precisely because it is constituted out of *some* elements, out of a certain number of ‘pieces’, diverse as these may be in nature and behaviour. We can easily concede a number of points to postmodernism (...) but we cannot simply deny what is strikingly observable, and what, after all, makes any ‘chance-driven’ system possible to begin with: multitude and variety. If this is so, then postmodernism must contain inside itself at least a few sections that are based on continuity and on identity. If it does not, the situation ceases to be describable as randomness, chance, and discontinuity, and becomes instead a kind of uniformity, of general fixity and predictability — in other words, it becomes exactly the opposite of what it claims to be. Continuity and identity are therefore not only imaginable inside a postmodernism mode of existence, they are *absolutely necessary* for its survival (Nemoianu, 2010, p. 7 — author’s emphasis).

According to writers such as Roberts and Nemoianu, then, in the destabilisation of the bourgeois/proletariat dualism, identity and subjectivity may shift to gender, race and sexuality, as opposed to disappearing completely. Theorists such as Lyotard and Foucault see an intrinsic link between the “Death of Subjectivity” and the centralisation of power. Roberts (1990) criticises Lyotard for this, writing that many of his works, including *The Postmodern Condition*, are based on highly selective accounts of modernity; expansion of the nuclear state and the rise of the mass media are considered “technological and industrial processes *out of control*” (1990, p. 12 — author’s emphasis), and thus the “Heideggerian notion of technology as the death of subjectivity is pushed towards apocalyptic ends” (1990, p. 12). In *The Subject and Power*, Foucault suggests that Western science and globalising discourses have been, and continue to be, used to oppress; institutionalised power is therefore seen as nothing but a threat to subjectivity. Where, then, do

Devo stand on this “identity crisis”? Do they stand with theorists such as Lyotard and Foucault, insisting on the “Death of Subjectivity” as a result of the centralisation of technology? Or, like Roberts (1990) and Nemoianu (2010), do they envisage a future where technology as “Death of Subjectivity” is not pushed towards apocalyptic ends, but instead takes radical forms? Devo’s album track “Corporate Anthem”, released as part of the album *Duty Now for the Future* in 1979, is a nod to the 1975 Norman Jewison film *Rollerball* (Devo Inc., 2014). *Rollerball* is set in 2018, where the world has become a corporate state, home to entities such as the Energy Corporation — a global energy monopoly based in Houston which controls access to all transport, luxury housing, communication, and food. In “Corporate Anthem”, Devo introduce themselves as a corporation (see Fig. 1). The music is a synthesised fanfare, accompanied by a video of Devo saluting the corporation to which they are enslaved. The band are wearing identical, industrial uniforms, thus eroding personal identity and destroying uniqueness in the name of corporate capitalism. This visual, accompanied by the fanfare-like musical flourish, could be read as Devo’s paranoia concerning the rise of corporate capitalism, the centralisation of technology, and subsequent decline of individual identity.



Figure 1: Devo “Corporate Anthem”.
Source: Devo Inc., 2014.



Figure 2: Devo “The Day My Baby Gave Me a Surprise”.
Source: Devo Inc., 2014.



Figure 3: Devo “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”.
Source: Devo Inc., 2014.

On the surface “Corporate Anthem” echoes the works of writers such as Foucault and Lyotard, who push the “Death of Subjectivity” towards apocalyptic ends. However, an alternative reading might be that Devo are in fact preserving their subjectivity in the hope that it may take radical

forms. By wearing sunglasses, Devo are shielding their eyes, and therefore souls (there is a historical connection between the eyes and the soul in Western literature; for example, in many of his Sonnets, Shakespeare uses the eyes as a metaphor for the soul) from the blinding light of corporate capitalism, consequently preserving their subjectivity. Devo often wear identical uniforms *and* sunglasses (sometimes tape is used) in their videos (see Fig. 2). This shielding could be read as an act of optimism; despite the oppressive powers of corporate capitalism, there is still hope for subjectivity — it may yet take radical forms, and shift from class to gender, race, or sexuality. The alternative reading, that identity is completely eroded in the wake of global corporations, is rather more pessimistic. Whichever way one chooses to read “Corporate Anthem”, it is clear that Devo are paranoid about the rise of corporate capitalism, and the threat it presents to personal identity; whether there is a future for this subjectivity, however, remains disputable.

3. Celebration of parody, or trivial kitsch?

As briefly discussed earlier, Hebdige (1998) identifies three negations which underpin postmodernism. His second negation, “against teleology” is a fundamental rejection of the philosophical study of nature by attempting to describe things in terms of their purpose, principle, or goal (Oxford Dictionary, 2016) (1998, pp. 377-379). Baudrillard’s (1998 [1981]) *The Precession of Simulacra* draws on (and rejects) the phenomenon of teleology. He introduces the idea of simulacra, or copies that depict things that either had no original to begin with, or that no longer have an original. Baudrillard claims that Western society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is merely a simulation; consumer goods have a “sign-exchange value”, which signifies distinction, taste, and social stature. For example, when purchasing a car, one might be drawn to its symbolic value, as opposed to its use-value. Baudrillard’s work draws on post-structuralist ideas on the elevation of the signifier; in elevating the signifier, or the sign’s physical form, the result is what Hebdige defines as a “parodic inversion of historical materialism [where] the model precedes and generates the real-seeming” (1998, p. 377). Mirrors, icons and surfaces are therefore celebrated, and parody ensues. Jameson (1992) explores this concept, arguing that in elevating an object’s physical form, the linguistic norm — and therefore parody — cannot exist. Parody capitalises on the uniqueness of styles, playing on their idiosyncrasies to produce a mock of the original. Parody, for Jameson, should cast ridicule on the private nature of eccentricities with respect to linguistic norms: in elevating the signifier, the linguistic norm is lost; therefore, parody (by definition) cannot exist. In *The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History*, Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon (1986-87) responds to Jameson’s article, rejecting his concept completely. For Hutcheon, postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms and its theory mock “the original” in a parodic manner by installing, and then subverting, convention. Postmodernism self-consciously calls attention to its own inherent paradoxes, whilst offering a critical re-reading of the past. The borderline between art and the world is re-mapped, producing a model that is embroiled within that which it seeks to criticise. Hutcheon argues that the paradox of parody is that it is not essentially depthless, trivial Kitsch — as Jameson suggests — but rather it leads to a vision of interconnectedness. This rejection is supported by Roberts (1990), who criticises Jameson for assuming that postmodernism is coeval with post-structuralism. It is clear from much of Devo’s work that they intend to play on the conventions of popular music. In 1978, Devo released a cover of The Rolling Stone’s 1965 hit “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”. If, according to Hutcheon, postmodernist parody installs and subverts convention, then it would appear that Devo’s cover could be read as postmodernist art. From the analysis of “Corporate Anthem”, it is clear that Devo were paranoid about the negative impacts of corporate capitalism on subjectivity, and so in covering a song that became successful by the efforts of multi-national corporation London Records (Official Charts Company, 2016), whilst self-consciously demonstrating an erosion of individualism through identical, industrial outfits (see Fig. 3), Devo offer a critical and ironic re-reading of the

song. They are installing convention by offering a model that is profoundly implicated in 1960s rock 'n' roll — the instrumental line-up for example is not dissimilar to the original — and are therefore in a position to offer a critical re-reading from within. Devo are capitalising on the idiosyncrasies of classical rock 'n' roll, whilst offering an ironic re-reading of the genre. Other signs from the video point towards this reading, for example: the tag on the guitar at the beginning could be read as a nod towards the idea of music as a commodity, and the “Devo” logo worn by all band members presents the band as a product.

4. Conclusions

Devo's music clearly sits within a postmodern framework. In drawing on postmodernist ideas concerning the “Death of Subjectivity” and the centralisation of technology in late capitalist Western society, Devo's music sits somewhere in between the Foucault/Lyotard, and the Roberts/Nemoianu perspectives; further investigation into alternative schools of postmodernist thought, and Devo's musical output (particularly between 1975-1980), would help pinpoint the specific tenets of postmodernism upon which Devo's music is constructed. Their use of postmodernist parody supports Hutcheon's argument that parody is fundamental to postmodernist art — Devo's ironic re-reading of 1960s classical rock 'n' roll would not work without the shared conventions of popular music, from within which Devo can criticise and thus subvert. Devo's approach therefore appears to denounce Jameson's ideas, rendering them too abstract. One of the main criticisms of Jameson's work is that it often lacks empirical evidence, and Devo's work could be used as an example to support this. A brief analysis of “Corporate Anthem” and “(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction” demonstrates that Devo's music can be read as a postmodernist reaction to the rise of corporate capitalism in early 1980s America.

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