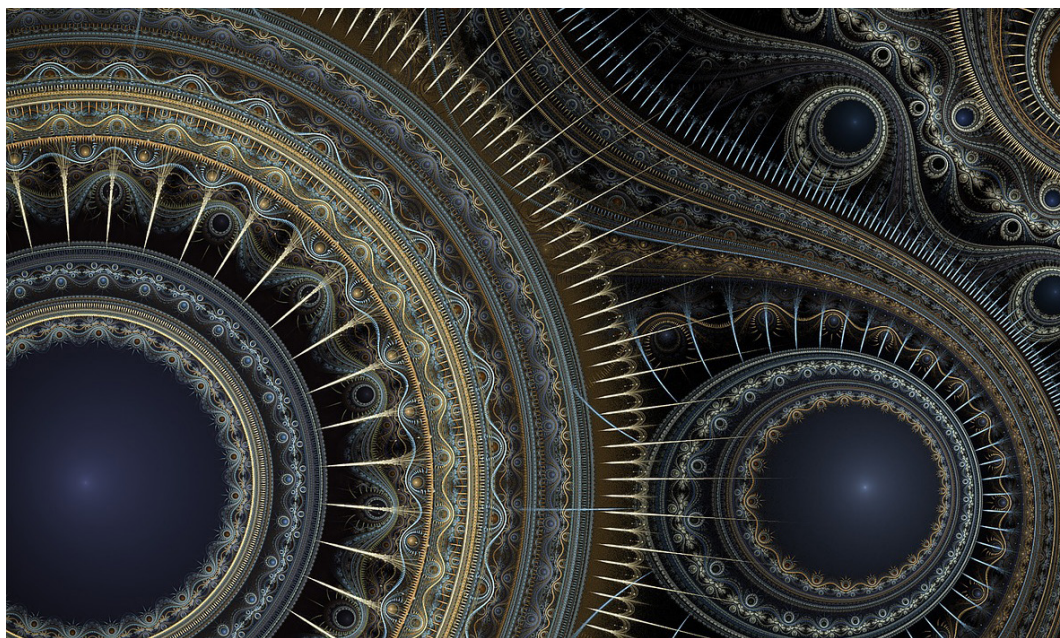


Meaning Making Machine



Miriam Fernández Santiago

EDITORIAL COMARES



Miriam Fernández Santiago

MEANING MAKING MACHINE

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Introduction

The principle of analogy, the analogical analytic, assures the passage, the unity, the synthetic power between both terms of this opposition.

J. Derrida, *The Archaeology of the Frivolous*.

Seventy years after the first apparition of the historical and cultural manifestations that we now call Postmodernism, the development of a study on postmodernity might be considered a futility. Postmodernism has not only been rich in artistic manifestations, but also prolific in the production of critical research. After reading the work of key figures of postmodern studies such as Linda Hutcheon, Jean François Lyotard, Paul the Man, Terry Eagleton, Fredrick Jameson, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze and Feliz Guatari, or Jean Baudrillard, and the extensive corpus of compilations of critical essays that sum up, review and analyze the work of such key figures, one might have the feeling that there is little more to say about Postmodernism from a theoretical point of view. However, there are still some unexplored aspects and a few unanswered questions about postmodernity that require examination.

The present study is the result of six years of research on a coincidence that fascinated me from the moment at which I realized that more than a punctual coincidence, it was a recurrent feature of postmodern fiction. That feature is humor. My first reading of postmodern fiction simply pleased me as funny but as I continued to read postmodern works, the recurrence of this feature began to intrigue me. Was frivolity—as Marxist critics of Postmodernism such as Fredrick Jameson and Terry Eagleton suggest—a characteristic of the postmodern historical moment that postmodern writers reflected in their works? And if so, what could be the cause of such frivolity at this precise historical period? After three years of research, I proposed a hypothesis that explored the use of humor in postmodern fiction from three different perspectives and that became the basis of my M. A. thesis.

I established a pattern of similarity between Fredrick Jameson's analysis of the postmodern consumerist society in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and Henri Bergson's study of laughter in his eponymous work. I also compared Freud's famous study on jokes and the unconscious with Linda Hutcheon's study of the narcissistic component of postmodern literature in *Narcissistic Narrative* and I applied this comparison to the analysis of metafiction. My study concluded with an analysis of intertextuality from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body in *Rabelais and His*

World. Although my research from those years was recognized, I still had the feeling that the question that had intrigued me so much had not been completely answered.

After some traveling, reading, and much thinking, I found a common denominator in postmodernity and humor with a specific function within discourse: the legitimization of discourse itself. This answer came to me as a progressive surprise. It was a surprise because I never intended to find it. The project of finding the legitimization of discourse would have sounded too ambitious to even be considered in practical terms. But this surprise did not arrive as a sudden "eureka." It rather crept beneath my reading, making my writing always seem inconclusive, always lacking something. The legitimization of discourse progressively surprised me as the revelation of my own ignorance, and as it revealed my ignorance it also justified my study.

The presence of this ignorance never abandoned me through my research, sometimes making me feel stupid, and always leading me in the wrong direction. My first reflection into the right path was to think that both humorous and postmodern discourses were based on the production of such ignorance. There was something either intentionally untold or impossible to tell that was common to the simplest of jokes and to the most intricate postmodern philosophical work. The feeling that there is something missing is a common feature in the analysis of both humor and postmodernity.

Ignorance is indeed at the core of this study. I have made reference to it using many terms in a non-synonymous way that, however, kept the trace of ignorance as a common referent. In chapters two and three, I refer to ignorance as *void*, sometimes meaning a void of experience or existence, sometimes meaning a void of knowledge or expression, and sometimes meaning a void of certainty or accuracy. In many senses, it could even be argued that this is a study on ignorance but I prefer to consider it a study on the conditions and possibility of meaning.

When speaking of humor I have found terms like baseness, incongruity, inelasticity, unexpectedness, unconsciouness, maladjustment, the unnatural, the uncontrollable, and many others. As for postmodernity, the accumulation of negative prefixes is not less remarkable: inconsistency, unreliability, uncertainty, indeterminacy, instability, ungroundedness, illegitimacy and incoherence. One could stop here and define both humor and postmodernity in terms of negation. I have suggested that this negative component of postmodernity might be considered as the sign of the twentieth-century crisis of meaning. In the case of humor, the persistence and the universal character of this threat to the basis of meaning excludes crisis as an explanation, except if meaning is redefined as a category in a permanent state of crisis. The uncertainty produced by humor might be the sign of a general uncertainty underlying all meaning. If ignorance is part of meaning, then the increase of ignorance should also produce an increase of meaning (this effect is what is commonly perceived as the fool's wisdom). If such is also the case in postmodernism, then postmodernism should be considered as a development (and not a destruction) of the modern project.

In the first chapter of this study I make a review of some of the most important critical studies on humor over the ages. I try to establish a pattern of consistency among the many

different visions of humor provided by a heterogeneous group of thinkers, including philosophers, psychologists, and literary writers and critics. This review, which analyzes the work of Plato, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Congreve, Meredith, Freud, Bergson, and Bakhtin among others, provides some key notions and valuable terminology that would be later used in the analysis of postmodernity.

Chapters two and three are mainly devoted to the analysis of the possibility that meaning can be understood in terms of ignorance. Chapter two is entitled "Seeking Meaning" since all the religious practices analyzed in this chapter have the common purpose of naming, knowing, or giving a voice to what is experienced as a void in expression or an absence of knowledge. This is especially obvious in my analysis of the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz and Zen practice. My analysis of demonology is mainly focused on the futility of phenomenological study, and on the question of authority. The identity and the presence of the Devil are negative in essence, especially as it concerns divine language, which I interpret both as authoritative, legitimate, or univocal language. The presence of the Devil always points at the absence of God as omnipresent and omniscient.

Particularly revealing of the unknown as the named is the section dedicated to the study of preterition. In this section, the possibility of naming is assimilated to the possibility of existence. The existence of the preterite and their invasion of the present time is the physical evidence of the existence of the unnamed and of the necessity of defining its presence as an absence. By the end of the second chapter, it seems clear that it is possible to name the unnameable, give voice to the referential void, or increase knowledge by increasing ignorance. I define humor as a representative mechanism that increases ignorance with the purpose of increasing knowledge. In other words, humor produces meaningful messages out of meaninglessness.

Once I prove that meaning can be attained through meaninglessness and knowledge through ignorance, I proceed to undertake the opposite task: to prove that what is commonly considered as knowledge is in fact based on ignorance and that no representation is univocal. The third chapter of this study moves from the field of humor into postmodernism with the purpose of determining the origin of the postmodern crisis of meaning. The previous section on preterition advances a discussion on the temporal aspect of language that is developed in the discussion of Einstein's Relativity Theory. After my analysis of preterition I conclude that a teleological or lineal conception of language produces a representative void that accounts for the indeterminacy of meaning. In the third chapter I suggest that what is perceived as a void in representation is the effect of a relativization of representative time and space.

What is perceived as meaningless, indeterminate or irrational at a certain representative speed is indeed the effect of perceiving other representative speeds. This assertion has a double, paradoxical consequence: on the one hand it relativizes authority and univocity, and on the other hand, it guarantees the legitimacy of any representative speed. In other words, I suggest that all representation is subject to be inexact, but also that this circumstance guarantees the possibility for any representation to be exact. That truth

and knowledge are relativized does not destruct the possibility of truth and knowledge, it rather expands such possibilities.

My analysis of the notion of uncertainty in Quantum Physics develops Lyotard's proposal of parody as the end and not the means of science. If there is such a thing as true knowledge, it must be a knowledge that pursues uncertainty. I propose considering from this perspective the Quantum physicist Niels Bohr's assertion that instrumental disturbance is unavoidable and should therefore be considered as part of the object of study. If all knowledge is mediated by the use of some instrument of observation, then all knowledge is disturbed and therefore, erroneous. Only by considering knowledge and ignorance as complementary elements of the same reality can inaccuracy be avoided. The means of representation which encourage indeterminacy and point at the representative means as part of what they represent are more accurate means of representation than those that claim for the possibility of exact imitation or representation. Humor and postmodernity make use of such representative means that increase accuracy by increasing indeterminacy.

The fourth and last chapter of this study is a reflection of the position that two of the most significant thinkers of postmodernity take concerning the possibility of representation and a comparison of both positions with what I consider to be the two complementary moments of humor: the ridiculous and the humorous. This chapter opens with general considerations on reason and the fallacy of representation as an introduction to some of Wittgenstein's reflections on the possibility to make a logical representation of the physical world. The same as Bohr, Wittgenstein is aware that to know or name the physical world, it is necessary first to determine the grounds on which the categories of knowledge and the means of representation are based. In Wittgenstein's opinion, this is an impossible task that nevertheless, he successfully accomplishes.

This kind of contradiction is like the central paradox underlying the whole deconstructive project. Both Wittgenstein and Derrida denounce the lack of authority of any knowledge and representation, but surprisingly produce a firm authoritative ground from which to utter their denunciation. The fact that they never recognize their accomplishment answers a methodological need that is also present in humor. At the end of the chapter, I explore Deleuze's notions of rhizome and Body without Organs (BwO henceforward). The rhizomatic and the BwO propose an all-inclusive system whose boundaries (in terms of naming and of origins and ends) can be found in any of its elements. By being devoid of a center from which to establish differences, the center of the rhizomatic system is everywhere. The rhizomatic system is organized like a system of reflections with no original, which is the same as saying that all reflections are originals. I suggest that postmodern and humorous discourses are organized as rhizomatic systems whose limits make their own center. Since these systems include (and not exclude) their own limits as part of the system, the external, objective position that is necessary to represent them is not beyond the margins and possibilities of the system. As a result, the meaningless becomes meaningful, but it is only possible to name it by denying the possibility of naming.

The readers who face the index of this study without having previously read this introduction might feel the disappointment—if not confusion—to find that the bulk of my

writing is dedicated to religion and Physics. For this reason, I must point at the methodological need to look at events from a distance, which is the need to use instrumental mediation. My detour from humor and postmodernity into the religious and scientific discourses intends to gain a marginal perspective from which to be able to name both humorous and postmodern discourses.

The analysis of both the religious and scientific discourses is aimed at exploring both the nameable and unnamable (reasonable and unreasonable) aspects implied in the expression of a referential absence that characterizes the humorous and postmodern discourses. Religious discourse takes for granted the unnamable and then proceeds to give it an expression. Twentieth-century Physics takes for granted the expression of the physical world and then finds out that the physical world escapes expression. By placing the analysis of the religious and scientific discourses in opposite mirroring positions at the center of my study, I intend to reveal the inconsistency of the assumed relations of accuracy and uncertainty traditionally established between sign and referent. This mirroring pair reveals a whole inverted order in such relationships. Such inverted order proposes the expression of meaninglessness and uncertainty as the most accurate representation (actually, even presentation) of a referent.

The central mirroring pair is framed by an introductory overview and commentary of the development of critical discourse on humor over the centuries in the first chapter, and by a discussion of some crucial postmodern questions in the fourth chapter. I opted for this organization also for several reasons. Since humor appeared before postmodernity, I considered it appropriate to place the chapter on humor before the chapter on postmodernity. The presentation and discussion of previous studies on humor at the beginning of my study provides both terminology (word) and historical legitimacy (authority) to my study before my study really begins.

As chapters develop, this terminology reappears and mutates according to each new context producing the effect of a *déjà vu*, or a trace of legitimacy that supports the development of my arguments. Along the whole second chapter, these traces can still be identified as belonging exclusively to the scope of humor, but as the third chapter develops they start to work also as a promise of postmodernity that becomes full postmodern discussion on postmodern discourse in the fourth chapter while still retaining the trace of humor. This way, I draw a certain causal line through what seems to be just a pastiche of disconnected topics and discourses. This format produces the effect of establishing a complementary relation between unity and multiplicity among disciplines that parallels the complementary relation existing between *différance* and univocal expression, rhizome and tree, voice and void, reason and unreason, absence and presence, and similar contradictory pairs in both the humorous and postmodern discourses.

The last reason to place the chapters of humor and postmodernity at the margins of my study is that given the marginal status of humorous discourse and the postmodern taste for marginality, I considered that the best place for both would be the margins of my study. This argument does not merely satisfy an aesthetic impulse based on the area of what I call in chapter three the “referential diffraction ring” of the word “margin.” It is

rather the expression of the function of all margins: that of determining the beginning and end of the object, of delimiting the object, and therefore, of naming the object. If I was to speak about humor and postmodernity in my study, this should happen at the beginning and end of my study (the margins of the study that legitimize the study): the frame that names the picture.

Apart from the chapter and subchapter division, I thought it would be appropriate to organize this study in sections that appear under thematic headings. This division is aimed at guiding the reader through the whole of the study. The reason why the sign & appears between these sections is my belief that this sign permits to establish a double relationship of division and juxtaposition between them. The relation of division breaks the illusion of continuity that makes any discourse subject to be ridiculous. This parataxis points at the need to sustain some kind of connection between the individual components of any discourse (if a logical communication is to be produced) and shatters the illusion of hierarchical legitimacy of discourse. At the beginning of most of these sections I have also included some epigraphs related to the specific topic discussed in that section, sometimes as an introduction and sometimes as advancing a conclusion. In any case, they always attempt to signal a parenthetical presence within the text that somehow legitimizes what comes after them.

This study is merely theoretical. The reader may thus miss some practical application of my theories that could serve both to illustrate and verify them. It could even be argued that the central chapters on religion and science could have been substituted by some practical evidence of the theories proposed. I have already justified the presence of these chapters as necessary detours from humor and postmodernity that allow to observe humor and postmodernity from a vantage external referential position. But I will justify the lack of practical or empirical verification of my theories with several arguments. The most obvious one is that empirical verification is impossible for a referential system that necessarily disturbs verification. The only way to avoid such disturbance would have been to write a humorous or postmodern text, which escapes the margins of a study such as the one that concerns us here.

The second argument (closely related to the first one and not less obvious) is that no partial verification (in case verification was possible) could account for any theoretical generalization. In other words, the analysis of a selection of postmodern and humorous texts would not justify the assertions on humor and postmodernity made in this study. Needless to say, that it would be impossible to provide an absolute verification of such assertions. If I considered that something is better than nothing and decided for partial verification, I might manage to fool the reader of my study trying to pass a few texts as the paradigms of humor and postmodernity. However, I would not fool myself, nor is it my intention to fool the reader of my study.

Nevertheless, I believe that the theoretical approach to humor and postmodernity proposed by my study can be used to analyze humorous and postmodern texts. Although the main purpose of this study is to provide some theoretical answers about the nature of humorous and postmodern texts, its perspective and conclusions may also help

to develop both future critical theory and textual analysis. In the field of textual analysis, this study proposes a revision of textual marginality (in terms of exclusion and due to ambiguity, inaccuracy, or meaninglessness) in a new light. This new light allows to analyze such texts as a parenthetical necessity within a wider textual and extratextual context. In the field of critical theory, I have tried to propose a more accurate perspective in the direction of the acknowledgment and even practice of inaccuracy within certain cautionary margins that would prevent the dissolution of critical discourse of a theory and a practice of the drawing of such margins.

I would also like to justify my choice of the topics and sources presented above. This choice was made according to the following criteria. Firstly, the connections found should not lead the detours from my main interest so far that they changed the nature of my main interest and secondly, the disconnections should not interrupt (invalidate) the development of my argument. My choice was also conditioned by a sense of economy that has nothing to do with the length of the study (since this study is not particularly long), but to the awareness that all arguments and counterarguments that could be provided to either support or refute my thesis could be ultimately reduced to the meaninglessness that always results from too prolonged a discussion. I am aware that my arguments could be supported and refuted by a nearly infinite number of previous studies. The fact that it is virtually impossible to either consider or discuss all of them in my study would not justify the fact that I could have included at least a few more of them.

It is a real pity not to have included an analysis of the medieval Goliards and the *Carmina Burana* as a link between humorous and religious discourses. I would have also liked to include some reflections on information theory and media such as the ones proposed by John Johnston in *Information Multiplicity* (1998) and I would have been delighted to develop my approach to humorous and postmodern discourses from the perspective of chaos theory, including some considerations from Gordon Slethaug's *Beautiful Chaos* (2000) and Alexander Argyros 's *A Blessed Rage for Order* (1994) in the third chapter. Of course, I miss the Lacanian and Marxist approach of my M.A. thesis and a development of the narcissistic aspects that Linda Hutcheon finds in postmodern fiction in an analysis of the figure of the fool. I was also tempted to use Michelle Foucault's study of discipline and power in relation with the liberating, repressive and legitimizing aspects of humorous and postmodern discourses, but finally decided for the ritual perspective since I considered that it was more in consonance with my comparison between humorous and religious discourse. I would have loved to include some considerations on the possible relevance of my analysis to the feminist and postcolonial discourses, which in my opinion, could benefit from my study of the politics of inclusion and exclusion and the ritual aspect of marginalization. However, I consider that those aspects that I include provide enough legitimacy to the rigor of my study and that although my study might benefit from the inclusion of more considerations, this benefit would not substantially alter the core of my argument. Whether mercifully or justly, I chose those that I considered best suited to my purpose and discarded the rest.

The multidisciplinary approach used in this study more than often produces terminological intrusions among disciplines. The reader might thus be puzzled at the use of certain terminology out of its discipline. The attempt to explain the significance of such terminology within its own discipline has sometimes unbalanced the development of my arguments towards digression. This apparent inconvenience, however, has the advantage of providing valuable background parallelism between disciplines, which guarantees a more confident use of specific terminology in the context of other disciplines. It could be argued that such overlicensed use of terminology is detrimental to the scientific rigor of the study. Nevertheless, the consideration that any discipline that is closed to multidisciplinary intrusion is doomed to exhaustion is a good reason to consider multidisciplinary intoxication as a viable path to follow in all academic research. The politics of this study is thus a politics of inclusion that desires (more than restricts) terminological intoxication. It is only the acceptance of internal differences what allows the accurate delimitation of a discipline.

The conclusions obtained from this study must be viewed within the frame of what can already be considered a postmodern philosophy and more specifically, within a Nietzschean/Heideggerian tradition in the line of poststructuralist thinkers such as Lyotard, Derrida, and Deleuze. Indeed, when I say "postmodern" it is to this branch of postmodernity that I refer. It might be argued that my conciliatory vision of subversion and change with certain ideologies and sources of power (mainly neocapitalist) through the application of the notion of complementarity to the extremes of the many postmodern paradoxes is closer to Habermas' ideas than to Lyotard's.

However, my analysis of humor in relation with postmodernity focuses more on the dynamic and non-discriminatory alternatives that postmodernism opposes to an ontology of Being. My intention is not to replace a metanarrative by another but to investigate what are the techniques used by metanarratives to survive. I believe that the question of metanarratives is what allows for such survival. My argument is that humorous and postmodern techniques legitimate metanarratives by questioning them and show that the authority of metanarratives resides in their transiency.

The main conclusion obtained from this study is that the possibility of expression (its legitimation) is given by the expressions of the internal meaninglessness of all meaning, of all expression. The endemic *différance* of all representations is only a trick of perception that installs difference within complementary relations. Both meaning and meaninglessness are the complementary aspects of representation that legitimize representation. The humorous and postmodern projects coincide in that both provide the legitimacy of discourse by making meaning out of meaninglessness.

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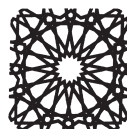
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Dirigida por:
Ana Belén Martínez López y Pedro San Ginés Aguilar

Meaning Making Machine is a study of meaninglessness at the core of meaning making. It contends that some textual strategies typical of humorous and postmodern discourses apparently aiming at meaninglessness are in fact inherent features of all discourse that allow for an exponential production of meaning. In times when information-saturated digital markets strive to thrive by cashing on human attention, the threats of post-truth, fragmentation, spectacularity and stunt emotion are nonetheless confronted with a return to populism and essentialist metanarratives.

This monograph explores the complementary relation operating between the rational and the irrational, the logical and the illogical, the certain and the uncertain, or the pointless and the purposeful in the process of making meaning. Since that complementarity cannot be escaped, the purposeful exploitation of the irrational, the magical, the illogical, the absurd, the fragmentary or the meaningless can be instrumentalized for the production of meaningful discourse.

In the face of irrelevance, meaningfulness emerges as a sense of purpose and a direction that can ameliorate the existentialist angst of the digital age. This however, demands the implementation of an ecology of meaning to complement the current economy of attention. The excessive polarization of this complementary relation may lead to radical essentialism as well as relativism. This is where we stand at the end of postmodernism; on the verge of measuring the meaningful balance to meaningless relevance.



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editorial

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