



Published by
*Centre for Languages and
Translational Studies*

Pakistan Journal of Languages and Translation Studies

ISSN (Print) 2410-1230
ISSN (Online) 2519-5042
Volume 11 Issue 2 2023
Pages 86-97

Open Access

Deconstructing Manifestos: Exploring Postmodern Anti-Form through Parody and Negation

Publication Details

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Paper Received:

September 18, 2023

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Paper Accepted:

November 15, 2023

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Paper Published:

December 30, 2023

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Abstract

Parody is one of the key features of postmodernism and if we read Postmodern manifestos, they not only appear a parody of the traditional manifestos, but also, they are anti-form of traditional manifestos. This research paper explores the anti-form of postmodern manifestos and look into how they negate the older tradition of manifesto writing. The researchers have adapted Ihab Hassan and Linda Hutcheon's theories to carry out the analysis of the selected manifestos. The study reveals the postmodernism manifestos deconstructs the manifestos of previous -ism and stand on their own as anti-manifestos. The study paves way for future researchers to examine how anti-manifestos shape modern art and literature, study how digital media aids their spread, and analyze how postmodernism intersects with other cultural movements to understand its ongoing impact.



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Keywords: Parody, postmodern, manifesto, antiform, deconstruction

1. Introduction

Manifestos are a reflection of ideas, opinions and views, and sometimes action plans, explaining art, literature, politics and religious views, showing collective thought of specific human groups (“manifesto | Etymology, origin and meaning of manifesto by etymonline,” n.d.). Manifesto has its own uniqueness and literary importance because of its design and style. Besides other genres, the manifesto summons and squirms into the hidden consciousness of people. The manifesto goes into one’s mind- a text alive as an image. Its style keeps the manifesto running in mind, ready to come out as spoken texts at any given time. Manifesto is a public talk in a publicly fitting style, so postmodernism affects the manifestos more than other forms of literature because of its nature and style. Postmodern manifestos stand in contradiction to the traditional manifesto writing and presents rather an anti-form of the traditional manifestos.

Postmodern manifestos challenge the conventional norms associated with manifesto composition. Unlike traditional manifestos, which typically adopt a serious tone, adhere to formal structure, and address weighty subjects, postmodern manifestos exhibit a parodic quality.

The study tends to explore how postmodern manifestos stand in contradiction to the traditional manifesto writing and presents rather an anti-form of the traditional manifestos.

2. Conceptual Background

David Antin’s manifesto “The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism: A Manifesto” (1993) begins with “about two years ago ellie and I decided we needed a new mattress or maybe ellie decided it because i didnt pay much attention to the problem” (1) with no consideration of punctuation and seriousness whatsoever. Postmodern manifestos stand in negation to all the conventional rules attached to manifesto writing. Traditional manifestos were serious in tone with proper form and serious subject-matter calling for an action.

However, postmodern manifestos are parodic in nature. To logicize the aforementioned claim we shall be adapting Linda Huteon and Ihab Hassan’s theories on postmodernism. Ihab Hassan in “Postface To The Dismemberment Of Orpheus” (1982) has theorize postmodernism as having following characteristics; anti-form, play, chance, exhaustion/silence, process/performance/happening, anarchy, participation, antithesis, absence, dispersa, text/intertext, rhetoric, syntgm, desire,

parataxis, metonymy, combination, against interpretation/misreading, signifier, decreation/deconstructions, scriptible, pataphysics, rhizome/surface, anti-narrative, mutant, schizophrenia, difference-deference/trace, the Holy Ghost, irony, polymorphous/androgynous, indeterminacy, idelect, and immanence (Hassan & Hassan, 1982). However, the researchers have adapted the following tenets of postmodernism for this research paper; play, deconstruction, anti-form, antithesis, anti-narrative/Petite Histoire, and irony.

According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is repetition with critical difference. She says that parody operates on two structural levels, one is authority and the other one is the transgression of that authority (Kostka, 2016). Gérard Genette calls such texts as hypertext and hypotext. Hypertext is the one which parodies and the hypotext is the one which gets parodied. Robert Archambeau writes that manifestos nowadays are either parodic or elegiac about the death of the manifestos. Archambeau maintains in “Marginality And Manifesto: A Response” that by and large manifestos are either elegiac (about death of manifestos) or parodic in nature. He states that the final manifesto of Joshua Mehigan offers only naked generational statements such as “we are here now” and “history will...salute us”. According to Archambeau, Thomas Sayer Ellis makes the very case of Mehigan at the end of his manifesto and highlights the “barefaced careerism” of manifesto writers. Ange Mlinko rejects the ideas of authoritative, totalitarian and prophetic role of manifesto writer. A.E. Stallings, according to Archambeau, speaks in an authoritative tone but not in the name of breaking with the past rather continuity (“rhymes do not need to be hidden...nothing to be ashamed of,” she maintains). Archambeau states that another group of poets write against the idea of group action fundamentalized in idea of manifesto writing. Charles Bernstein in his “Eight Manifestos” writes in denial of the group action idea inherited in manifestos (Archambeau, 2009). To study the postmodern tendency of the selected manifestos, we have used Hutcheon and Hassan’s aforementioned theories as underpinnings for this research paper. We have based our adaptation of the above-mentioned theories on Mayer and Sparrowe’s paper “Integrating Theories in AMJ Articles” which talks about integration of the theories and approaches together. The “Single Phenomenon, Two Theoretical Perspectives” approach appropriately fits our adaptation practice (Sparrowe & Mayer). According to Sparrowe and Mayer, the aforementioned approach is used for two theories, dimensioning from two different perspectives that speak about the same phenomenon. The theories to be adapted must have a common dependent variable; in our study, both theories describe the elements and form of postmodern works.

The study is delimited to following manifestos; “Personism: A Manifesto” by Frank O’hara, “The Theory and Practice Of Postmodernism: A Manifesto” by David Antin,

“The Final Manifesto” by Mehigan, “Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto I” by Richard Foreman, and “Neoism” by Monty Cantsin.

3. Discussion

Anitn’s manifesto starts as a funny story of Antin and his wife. It’s a ten-page long story about a mattress which one is tempted to call ridiculous. The beginning makes the reader wonder whether he is reading a story or some other work of fiction so the reader is confused whether it is the author or the narrator who is telling a story. The manifesto takes a non-serious tone throughout. In lines “she knows this about american consumer goods and she knows that these places would be equipped with rich delusional capabilities,” Antin makes reference to consumer society of late capitalism. He writes Elie is not into consumer products; however, she convinced him to go shopping. I think this represents the incredulous nature of postmodernism towards consumerism but also its association. The lines “i said we’ll open the yellow pages and we’ll look up mattresses and therell be several places that sell them and i’ll close my eyes and point a finger at one of these places” might be pointing to a Baudrillardian world of simulacrum where signifiers have become signified¹, so numbers of phone books would decide what place they are to visit. Postmodernism is obsessed with the concept of technology and signs interfering in people’s lives. Frederic Jameson has associated postmodernism with late capitalism, so consumerism is one of the features that is attached with the era of postmodernity (Jameson, 1984).

Another diverging point of this postmodern manifesto is its dismissiveness of grammatical rules, punctuation marks other grammatical necessities such as capitalization. Readers, at times, get confused which character is talking and whether it is a real story of Antin himself or is it a fictitious story. One other interesting thing is his wife’s name; he changes it to ellie and elly sometimes eleanor without capitalizing it. Instead of using periods at the end of sentences, the writer has put a space instead. It’s an ironic dig on the writers who put too much focus on the form of the work. This manifesto operates on the breath concept of Charles Olson, a postmodern writer, who has written against the writers who put too much focus on structuring a work in his manifesto “Projective Verse (Projectile (Percussive (Prospective Vs. The Non-Projective)” and proposes a composition by field for writers (Olson, 2009).

Frank O’hara’s manifesto “Personism” is parodical in nature. Ohara breaks all the conventions attached with writing manifestos. He takes the utter nonsensical overtones in his manifesto. He has challenged the romanticist poets who have put too much focus

¹ Baudrillard illustrates how in such subtle ways language keeps us from accessing “reality.” (“II: On Simulation”)

on rhythm and rhyme. When Wordsworth defined poetry as overflow of powerful emotions, he himself was very much conscious of rhyme and meter in his works. This Wordsworthian notion of poetry is challenged by O'hara who prefers to write on nerves. He says that this technical apparatus is just a question of common sense. He goes on to the extent of comparing poetry with a tight pair of pants saying "if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you" (1). He jibes on religion too when he says that because he doesn't believe in god, he does not have to make sound structures. Distinction between religion and science has a long history. Scientific revolution challenged the preexisting notions of religious authorities proposing that truth shall be based on empirical knowledge rather than subjective approaches towards the truth (Franken, n.d.). He goes on to say that he hates Vachel Lindsay who is considered as the founder of modern singing poetry. His assertive suggestion is to go on nerves while writing a poem as if someone is chasing you with a knife. O'hara states that poets should avoid being logical because being logical is a pain. Here it seems that he might be challenging the Western rationalization. Postmodernism stands in opposition to central tenets of modern western rationality (Browne, 2010).

In lines "But how then can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what?" (1), he challenges all the moral based or call-to-action works. He goes on to elaborate this in a less somber way by referencing the mother trying to force her kids into "eating too much cooked meat and potatoes". It apparently looks nonsensical but it poses a challenge to the purposefulness of preexisting -isms; like modernism, existentialism. Conventional manifestos are assertive in nature but O'hara departs from such conventions, he says, "nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them". He least cares about how his ideas will be perceived by the readers. When he tells the reason how Personism was found, he almost self-mocks. He states that it was founded by him after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959. He over exaggeratingly says that Personism would be the death of literature. The phrase "death of the literature" is a jibe on the grand eloquence of the manifestos which make grand claims. Therefore, he hyperbolically asserts that his new found movement would be the death of the literature. In the very last line, he challenges all the previous -isms which either focus on form or the content by calling those works "the recent propagandists" (2). O'Hara has rejected the traditional notions and the work itself is parodical. His use of informal language and his nonsensical comparisons of poetry with a pair of pants and movies is an ironic jibe on the formal writing style of manifestos. His manifesto stands as an antithesis of previous forms, for instance his statement "I hate Vachel Lindsay...rhythm, assonance, all that stuff" opposes the romantic lyrical poetry which takes rhyme and metre to be prototypical of poetry. Similarly, his line "the recent propagandists ...had better watch out" (2). He takes a playful tone in the manifesto

“personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal” (1). Manifestos are defined as public declaration where writer uses various rhetorical tools to make his point acceptable to the public (Stamper, n.d.). However, O’hara seems least concerned about the reader, rather he is taking it on a personal level.

Joschua Mehigan in his “The Final Manifesto” gives twenty-three generalised statements, the manifesto of Mehigan does not present any standard of its own rather it only presents the negation of all the traditions. We think this manifesto represents postmodernism at its best which rejects all the notions of previous -isms however it also does not provide any stable definition of work of art. “The Final Manifesto” stands against the idea of group action because it does not present any proposal as to how poetry or any other work of art should be, rather it is only dismissive of the Oedipal struggle (Archambeau, 2009) impregnated in writing manifestos. He is of the view that our ideas are worthless and we are a museum of irrelevance. Moreover, he thinks that history will forget us and salute it will salute us for what we are. This view of him, presents an antithesis to the established notions of manifesto writing. The manifesto stands as a petite histoire against all previous -isms. We see that “The Final Manifesto” has not kept the standard rules of writing a manifesto. It starts with no aims or objectives and does not follow the serious amplitude of the manifesto, rather Mehigan is playful when he makes such statements as “you should be kept as a pet”, however under the cloak of playfulness he might mean that all the established rules and norms should only have a position as that of a pet which entertains the eyes and is controlled by a master. His rash statement “you...philistine...Paul Bunyan...fraud” takes the criticism to another level where the author abashily and openly declares war against the traditions.

The hyperbolic statements such as “victory is ours” is parodic of the grand eloquence of the manifestos making big claims. Similarly, in O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto” his claim that personism will be the death of literature is also parodic in nature. “Your ideas are worthless/your aesthetic is stupid”, these lines challenge the idea of western rationality and logic. Postmodernism rejects all ideas of innovation and progress which were the central claims of scientific revolution. He criticizes the aesthetics of poetry, so he, like O’hara, is dismissive of rhyme and meter too. However, the difference between Mehigan and O’hara is that O’hara after being dismissive of the older traditions presents a model to follow while writing poetry while Mehigan provides no such standards to follow by the writers and poets. The aimlessness of the manifesto shatters the very definition of manifesto which requires an aim and objectives to fulfil. The entire manifesto is just a set of general statements standing against the old monarchs. It captures the spirit of postmodernism.

“The Neoism” manifesto by Cantsin consists of only one line and we think that this line has captured the whole essence of postmodernism. One of the features of postmodernism is that it neither accepts nor rejects, that is to say that postmodernism does not take any position. It is highly dismissive of all the established rules and rejects all the traditional notions. However, it does not make any claims or take any position itself. It remains fluid in nature. This feature of postmodernism is presented in “The Neoism” which says in one line that new Neoism has no manifesto. The manifesto breaks free from all rules of manifesto writing; it does not provide any action agenda nor does it provide any set standard rules for writers to follow in one line; only it stands in opposition to the whole process of manifesto writing. The Neoism manifesto’s poster is colored black which shows protest of Neoism when it comes to rules and objectives, the reason for which manifestos were written traditionally. “The Neoism” follows no prescribed format of manifesto writing. It is an antithesis of the manifesto. It is the parody of all set notions of the previous isms but also the form of the manifesto itself.

Foreman’s “Ontological Hysteric Manifesto I” starts with an ironic dig on the romantic writers who are always talking about emotions. The line “Art is not beauty of description or depth of emotion” stands in negation to the Wordsworthian notion of poetry that it is a flow of powerful emotion. It is dismissive of the romanticists that art should capture minute details. Foreman goes to say that art has nothing to do with the audience. Here, he is dismissive of the Aristotelian notion of art that it has a moral purpose and it purges the audience’s excessive emotions i.e. it carries out the catharsis. The manifesto challenges the metanarrative of Aristotle and romantic writers altogether and takes the position of *petit recit*. It captures the spirit of postmodernism which is in denial to everything altogether and stands on its own. Foreman says that most machines (art) run on audience fuel which challenges the art for life’s sake agenda. Writers like Bertolt Brecht who wrote to bring out social order are criticized here by Foreman. He says that it is man’s piggish desire to be at the center. This statement damages the enlightenment stance which makes man the center of everything. Even experimental modernism keeps man as the center. Foreman brashly states in words that it is the piggish desire of man to be at the center of postmodernism and rejects such logo centrism of man. He proposes that we make a perpetual motion machine. Perpetual means sustaining. He proposes a machine that would not be driven by any external force; this, he says, is the goal of the new art machine.

“The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism; A Manifesto” of Antin starts from a story where the narrator/author tells readers about him and his wife’s struggle to buy a new mattress. This, at first, seems absurd but this exactly is the motto of this manifesto. The story-like manifesto has broken the very foundations of the traditions attached to manifesto writing which is a genre of nonfiction. Readers get shocked in

the end when the author /narrator relates to the story or to put it better, chaos of the story with the postmodernism. The very idea of writing it in a story form is to represent the pastiche or intertextuality of postmodernism. Hutcheon calls it fluidity of boundaries where one genre overlaps with the other, so in this case, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction are blurred. The whole manifesto is a story of a man who might be Antin himself and his wife concerning a mattress. Only in the last paragraph the writer reveals that it is not a story but a manifesto of postmodernism. It is skillful and playful of Antin to present the features of postmodernism through story.

After generally analyzing the primary texts, let's carefully consider them in the light of the aforementioned theoretical underpinning. First tenet to be applied on the selected texts is postmodern playfulness. Hassan has associated this tendency to postmodernism. Postmodernism on the surface appears to be absurd when it comes to its forms. The idiosyncratic style of the postmodern writers makes it hard to describe the form which postmodernism takes on. However, under the experimental and playful tone of postmodernism, writers appear to be seriously challenging the established grand narratives of all the -isms. In "Personism: A Manifesto" of O'hara, his statements "I don't give a damn whether they eat or not , if they don't need poetry bully for them, and Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about..." present the playful element of postmodern works. Similarly, the story-like style of the "The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism: A Manifesto" is another example of playfulness of postmodernism. The final manifestos statements as "you should be kept as pet" are playful in tone. Under the satirical cloak, Mehigan is challenging the old monarchs. The playful advertisement of the "Neoism" manifesto stands as another example of the non-serious attitude of postmodernism. The whole manifesto is in one line "Neoism has no manifesto".

Postmodern manifestos deconstructs/de-creates the older praxis of manifesto writing while parodying the very thing itself. Manifesto traditionally were written to present a belief system of a particular group with its action agenda. In Personism O'Hara proposes for poets a way to write poetry; however, he speaks not on behalf of a group rather he talks in a highly personal tone. His statement "Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me" (1) displays that the manifesto doesn't belong to norms of some group rather it is only one person's views and he himself isn't sure about it does for example in last paragraph he writes "What can we expect from Personism? (This is getting good, isn't it?) Everything, but we won't get it. It is too new, too vital a movement to promise anything" (1).

The selected manifestos are an antiform of conventional manifestos. They turn upside down the whole standards of manifesto writing, take the Neoism manifesto as an instance. The whole manifesto consists of one line that says that it has no manifesto.

By saying this Cantsin doesn't really mean that there is no manifesto of Neoism, rather it presents that Neosim does not operate on any rules and standards and hence it displays the very essence of postmodernity. The form, or rather the antiform, of the "The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism: A Manifesto" is a negation of conventional manifestos. It starts with a story of Antin and his wife about a mattress and goes on without punctuation till the very end where in the last few lines Antin compares the whole story with the postmodernity. "The Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto I" takes on an antiform too. It is as short as eleven lines and the writer capitalizes, underlines and questions in an informal way. For instance, "WE MAKE A PERPETUAL MOTION MACHINE, FIND FUEL OTHER THAN DESIRE!", and "...makes itself run on new fuel."

The central feature of postmodernism is that it challenges the established authoritative and omniscient grand narratives. For example, O'hara has challenged the romanticism which put too much focus on the rhyme a meter of the poem. He openly declares that he hates Lindsay. In "The Final Manifesto", Mehigan has challenged the old monarchs for instance in line "your ideas are worthless, you are a museum of irrelevance, and history will forget you and salute us". In "Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto I", Foreman has challenged the Aristotelian and romanticist notions who put too much focus on audience and emotions respectively. For instance, in lines "art is not...depth of emotion...not to do something to audience."

Irony of these manifestos is that they work within the very system they try to subvert. These manifestos challenge the manifesto writing itself but take on the form of the manifesto themselves. The parodic form of these manifestos makes them ironic in nature. In the words of Hutchteon, "it (postmodern work) paradoxically incorporates what it challenges".

Manifesto in postmodern time is emerging as a genre but postmodern manifestos are not at all complying to the traditional notions and set standards of manifesto writing- rather all postmodernism manifestos are a parody of older manifestos. Under the non-serious and rather nonsensical playful tone, they criticize not only the form of the manifesto but also its content. The entire corpus of postmodern manifesto is parodic in nature. They stand as petit recits, challenging all the established societal notions. All the set rules like usage of academic writing- and proper grammar are put into question by the postmodernism manifestos. Writers of postmodernism manifesto defy all such considerations. To conclude, it is not wrong to say that the postmodern manifestos deconstruct the manifestos of previous -ism and stand on their own as anti-manifestos.

4. Findings and Conclusion

The analysis of Antin's manifesto highlights its playful and non-serious tone, evident from the humorous story about a mattress and the confusion it creates regarding the narrator's identity. The manifesto also delves into postmodern themes such as consumerism and the blurring of reality and simulation, drawing parallels to thinkers like Baudrillard and Jameson. Moreover, the disregard for grammatical rules and punctuation serves as a critique of formal writing conventions, echoing Charles Olson's concept of composition by field.

On the other hand, Frank O'Hara's manifesto, "Personism," takes a parodical approach, challenging traditional poetic conventions and manifestos themselves. O'Hara dismisses the emphasis on rhyme and meter, advocating instead for poetry that captures raw emotion and nerve. His manifesto ridicules the seriousness of previous -isms and grand claims, opting for a personal and informal tone. O'Hara's rejection of traditional notions and playful language serves as an antithesis to established forms of manifesto writing, emphasizing individual expression over adherence to conventions.

Both manifestos reflect a departure from conventional styles and a rejection of established norms, whether in the realm of consumer culture or poetic tradition. They highlight the postmodern tendency to question and subvert established structures, whether in society or art.

In O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto," the manifesto takes a personal and dismissive tone, challenging moral-based or call-to-action works. O'Hara's playful language and rejection of conventional manifesto structures reflect postmodern tendencies to question and parody established forms. His exaggerated claim that Personism would be the death of literature mocks the grand claims often found in manifestos, highlighting the irony inherent in his approach. Similarly, Mehigan's "The Final Manifesto" rejects all traditions without providing any new standards, embodying postmodern skepticism towards established norms. Mehigan's manifesto stands as a *petite histoire* against previous -isms, rejecting the seriousness and grandiosity often associated with manifestos.

"The Neoism" manifesto presents a single line that captures the essence of postmodernism by rejecting any manifesto altogether. This refusal to conform to traditional manifesto structures reflects postmodernism's fluid and anti-establishment nature.

Foreman's "Ontological Hysteric Manifesto I" challenges romantic and Aristotelian notions of art, rejecting the idea of art's moral purpose and its relation to the audience.

Foreman's playful language and rejection of traditional narrative structures embody postmodern tendencies to challenge established norms and narratives.

Overall, these manifestos embody the postmodern tendency to playfully deconstruct and parody established forms and structures, challenging traditional notions of art, literature, and manifesto writing. They stand as anti-manifestos, rejecting the seriousness and grandiosity often associated with manifestos while embodying the fluid and anti-establishment ethos of postmodernism.

In conclusion, the examination of various manifestos, including those by Antin, O'Hara, Mehigan, and Foreman, reveals a common thread of playful deconstruction and parody inherent in postmodernism. Through humor, rejection of formal conventions, and challenges to established norms, these manifestos embody the postmodern ethos of questioning and subverting traditional structures, whether in the realms of art, literature, or societal discourse.

Looking ahead, future research could delve deeper into the implications of these anti-manifestos in shaping contemporary artistic and literary movements. Additionally, exploring how digital media and online platforms have further facilitated the dissemination and evolution of these postmodern tendencies would provide valuable insights into the ongoing relevance and impact of such manifestos in the digital age. Moreover, analyzing the intersectionality of postmodernism with other cultural and philosophical movements could offer a more nuanced understanding of its complexities and enduring influence on contemporary discourse and creativity.

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