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Research Article

More on the Postmodernism of Rosler's: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems

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Abstract: Martha Rosler's textual-visual masterpiece The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems is in possession of numerous postmodernist dimensions. The current study, therefore, is intended to elucidate how The Bowery benefits from postmodernist aesthetics and rhetoric. It will argue that such postmodernist elements as irony, paradox, and parody lie at the heart of Rosler's photo-text art. To that end, the article will employ Linda Hutcheon's postmodernist terminology and theories as the underlying theoretical framework. Analysing The Bowery through the lens of the said theorist's postmodernist approach and vocabulary, the essay will assert that Rosler's premises resonate strongly with Hutcheon's theories. Moreover, generically viewed, The Bowery will be deemed to be a complex of postmodern photography and social documentary practices. The current article will attempt to re-evaluate and thus furnish a fresh reading of The Bowery in light of its postmodern conceptual and photographic elements.

Keywords: Irony, Parody, Postmodernism. Postmodern Photography.

1. Introduction

It takes courage to classify Martha Rosler's *the Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* into a certain form, genre or art style. Some have employed the generic term documentary photography enraging the opposing camp who assume there is very little of the so-called documentary in it. Some, no less perplexed than the others, attest to its postmodern nature, thereby raising further obfuscations and challenges. *The Bowery* is in possession of numerous characteristics, to be expounded later, that render its denomination so difficult as to require a great deal of investigation. The essay that follows sets out to introduce *The Bowery* in terms of different basic facets, shedding light on its setting as well as its structuring device. As another undertaking, the essay will illuminate the postmodern conceptual and photographic elements of *The Bowery* in the light of Linda Hutcheon's theories, thereby reaching a conclusive maxim of how postmodernism operates within the context of *The Bowery*. Last but not least, the essay will highlight the documentary, postmodern, and victim photography practices or genres in order to conclude whether or not they apply to *The Bowery.*

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Bowery in Essence

At the outset, it is fair to allow some words to facilitate the perception of the very meaning and nature of the term *The Bowery*, for it occupies the gist of the title of Rosler's work as well as the setting in which *The Bowery* came to life. The nature of this term has been best captured in the words of Edwards' saying, "[t]he current Bowery is a mile-long strip in lower Manhattan leading northward from Chatham Square to the intersection of East Fourth Street and Cooper Squar. It was originally a Native-American track through what became Manhattan" [1].

Apart from the geographic and historical context of the Bowery, one needs to grasp the social and cultural position for which the Bowery has been renowned so as to subsequently understand Rosler's depiction of it.

For a period during the eighteenth century it was a fashionable street lined with mansions, but as the city expanded it was surrounded by slums and rapidly engulfed. It was the territory of the Nativist gang the 'Bowery Boys' and a site of anti-conscription riots. In the early nineteenth century the Bowery developed a centripetal pull for the very poor and the outcast [2].

The Bowery, viewed critically in terms of what and who it housed in the last couple of decades, seems to carry quite a touchable weight of notoriety, voicing which does not bode well for the hearing ear. It was, in the full sense of the term, a dystopia. Let us borrow Edwards' words once more on this occasion: "[i]t was home to tattoo parlours, cheap clothing outlets, missions, bars, beer gardens and slop joints (inexpensive eating places). The Bowery became established as the haunt of the unemployed, drunks, drifters, sailors on shore leave and hobos (rural hoe boys) [3].

The Bowery, then, is what some cliché thinkers would call a sin city. In other terms, an isolated region for the isolated outcasts is what it is. An uncharted God-forsaken cursed land, however, might not seem much of an overstatement either, for it never welcomed the rich and the people of luxury and wealth. However unfortunate this may sound, it is not unfortunate that this very ill-spoken stretch of land has managed to be the focal attention of countless photographers, journalists, filmmakers, and elites of the same, or similar, sort. Stripped down to a few words, *The Bowery* has constantly functioned as a seductive voice for the problem seekers to problematize social issues: "[t]he Bowery has acted as a magnet for more than photographers. There have been social reports and journalism, and an entire genre of what Luc Sante characterised as sentimental and moralistic fiction set on the Lower East Side [4].

2.2. On Martha Rosler and The Bowery

Martha Rosler is not only a visual artist but also a scholar and a prolific author. Born in 1943 and having created art for over four decades, she is believed to be "one of the most influential artists of her generation [5]. In the preface to her *Decoys and Disruptions*, Rosler describes herself as the observer of the artistic systems: "I have spent the past few decades observing, and writing about, the workings of the systems and subsystems of the 'art world,' including its systems of production, exhibition, sales, and publicity…" (x). Not only have all these observations made an outright artist out of her, but they have also contributed to their fair share of her awareness of the inability and the inadequacy of the afore-said systems─ an allusion to *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*─ in the world today. She has employed a myriad of arts such as photography, video, installation, and photo-text print as her favored media. Thematically viewed, Rosler has constantly been concerned with such

issues as social criticism, cultural issues, and war. *The Bowery*, in a fashion of similitude, is immensely critical of a dystopian society unable to recover from its corrupt roots.

In approaching *The Bowery,* many courses, be they conceptual or photographic, are open to our advance. On top of the present essay's agenda comes the postmodernist dialectics characterizing Rosler's style in *The Bowery*, which will encompass a quest for the postmodern elements manifest in her works. Moreover, the essay in hand will set out to veer onto the province of photography, making efforts to infer how Rosler's photography converges into or diverges from the norms of the documentary, postmodern, and victim photography.

It is a contradiction to adequately describe a piece of art meant to be *inadequate* in its nature of *description*. Yet, at the risk of sounding even contradictory, this undertaking seems to be much of the aim of the words to appear. The generation of masterpieces, Jameson argues in his *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism*, is over, particularly in video and photo art work [6]. This essay is not targeted at procuring a response to the query whether *The Bowery* is a masterpiece or not. Yet, as Edwards maintains, "I do not know if …*The Bowery* is a masterpiece, but I am conscious that it still eludes my understanding…In fact, I still think *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* lies in our future, so much goes unsaid in addressing this piece of art.

The Bowery is a collection of 21 black-and-white photographs and 24 texts or groupings of words (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The images portray store windows, bank façades, and debris in the Bowery area of New York City, infamously known for the homeless, tramps, drug addicts, drunkards, and all the socially aberrant types. Most shop images are frontal, and the same applies to the banks and the buildings. The camera stance is as vertical as the image frames, and total parallelism is dominant between the frontal image of the facades and the film among all the photos. Apart from the above-cited explanations, Edwards provides better technicalities:

The work is displayed in 24 thin black wood frames; for the most part, two sheets of photographic paper figure in each element (or frame). Images and text are juxtaposed against one another, mounted directly on a dark-card ground (the first three pairs are anomalous: each contains just a single text panel, leaving blank the space where we might expect an image to appear). The backing boards measure 30 by 60 centimeters (approximately 12 by 24 inches). Both the photographs and the text panels have a white framing edge and an internal black masking line. The elements are arrayed in an elongated grid formation of four horizontal and six vertical rows, although it has sometimes been shown in groupings of 6 by 4 or 5 by 5, with a single gap after the final panel 13 [7].

Figure 1. The Bowery: Collection of 21 Black-and-White Photographs

The Bowery, at first sight, seems to be built more on a mathematical basis than a conceptual one. Moreover, the text and the images seem to be inseparably intertwined with one another. Neither the calculative nor the relational aspects happen to be accurate, however. In fact, many viewers might lay *The Bowery* juxtaposed with the concept of photo-caption art, whereas *The Bowery* falls into the photo-text class; and in this class, it is a type with a vague relational ground between the image and the text. As Edwards avers, "While the relations of image and text in *The Bowery* are not as clear-cut as image and caption, neither are they completely disconnected or independent [8]. Furthermore, in regard to its unsystematic and non-mathematical nature, Edwards continues to add that: *"The Bowery*

in two inadequate descriptive systems is, then, a botched or unsystematic system. It borrows a mode of presentation — the grid — that suggests metaphysical immobility, neutrality or objectivity, the interchangeability of commodities, the substitutability of desires… But there are grids and grids and grids…" [9].

Figure 2. The Bowery: 24 Texts or Groupings of Words

2.3. The Grid

One might wonder why Rosler opted for the grid as a structuring device. The Grid, as a modernist structuring device, has been a source of autonomy. In the words of Krauss, the grid was "an emblematic form of modernist art in its will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse. In its flatness, geometry and order, the grid proclaims the autonomy of art … in a way that performs a relay between material and Being or Mind or Spirit [10]. It is thus a kind of independent detachment or a novelty that the grid instills in the artwork, thereby rendering the work irreplaceably self-made and self-reliant.

In another reading through the eyes of Krauss, "the grid is a staircase to the Universal. [It] seems to proclaim a materialist substance, but slips imperceptibly towards its idealist other… but the underlying structure of the grid suggests a schizophrenic freezing of history, narrative and development [11]. Then, the grid as an artistic device is not only an instrument by which a sublime detachment and framing apart comes to life, but, on a more realistic note, it yields an alienating stillness and silence and disconnects the artwork from the historically important line of events by which that piece of art was previously evaluated and appreciated. Thus, the grid gives rise to independence, detachment, sublimity, materiality, and idealism.

That Rosler opts for the grid is no less of a phenomenon than the grid itself. In fact, in choosing this structuring device for the portrayal of the outcast region of New York, Rosler might not only tend to magnify what Krauss put forward in terms of detachment, but she also might implicitly create a sense of analogy. She is most likely to allow for a sense of oblique apartness in all facets of life in *The Bowery* alluding to the social decay, which is rife in the Bowery in such a conspicuous way that prompted Rosler to turn to a detaching device to separate it from the rest of the world. The more detached the device, the more strongly felt the distinct social isolation and decay of *The Bowery.*

3. Methodology

This study analyzes Martha Rosler's textual-visual masterpiece, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, by looking at the postmodernist dimension especially on the merits of postmodernist aesthetics and rhetoric.

The Bowery would be considered a complex of postmodern photography and social documentary practice. Rosler's photo-text work will be reconstructed using the postmodernist terminology and theories of Linda Hutcheon.

Results of the study will see how Rosler's premise resonates strongly with Hutcheon's theory.

4. Finding and Discussion

4.1. Postmodernism in The Bowery: Paradoxes

Should one be asked to come up with only one indispensable component of postmodernism today, the word would most likely be contradiction. This is an area about which Linda Hutcheon, as one of the theoretical forerunners of postmodernism, writes a great deal. In other words, contradictions and paradoxes, in more ways than one, shape the central plank of her arguments, particularly in *A Poetics of Postmodernism History, Theory, Fiction* (1988). Paradox and contradiction act like the very meta-narratives which she, along with the other postmodern thinkers, has attempted to repudiate. Regarding the pluralistically contradictory structure of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon adds: "I would like to begin by arguing that, for me, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography [12].

In line with the above-cited concept yet elsewhere, she sets her words consonant to a similar concern contending that "what I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political…these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of the presence of the past [13]. However, to Hutcheon, "the presence of the past" is not nostalgic but critical: "[t]his is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary…" [14]. Then, postmodernism delves into the past and converses with it, yet it does not sympathize with it nostalgically the way the previous liberal humanists did. And herein falls the irony of postmodernism.

In establishing a dialogue between Hutcheon's stance and Rosler's *the Bowery,* many analytical thoughts can surface. That an artist aims to reveal the inadequacy of her photography and calls it incompetent is but a solid affirmation of the contradictions and paradoxes which Hutcheon addresses. In *The Bowery,* Rosler is bound to censure as well as bring under critical scrutiny the inherent incapacities and the limitations of both photography and the text, hence the denomination of *two inadequate descriptive systems*. She is literally contradicting herself and her art to perhaps provide incentive and impetus for the future generation of artists. Perhaps she views herself as the presence of the past which is rapidly approaching, the same "critical revising of the past" suggested by postmodernist art. By the same token, Edwards contends that "*The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* is, as Rosler has said, an act of refusal. The labour of the negative provides an important clue for thinking about this artwork [15]. Rosler, thus, refuses to enable photography to display the pains and atrocities with which *The Bowery* has been afflicted for decades, hence a magnification of its stagnant dead-end position. This could be the most apposite occasion to refer to Hutcheon's "self-contradictory and self-undermining [1]. Nature of postmodernism in her *The Politics of Postmodernism*, for what Rosler does here is nothing but a strong undermining of not only herself but also her art in hopefully seeking out for a response or a change.

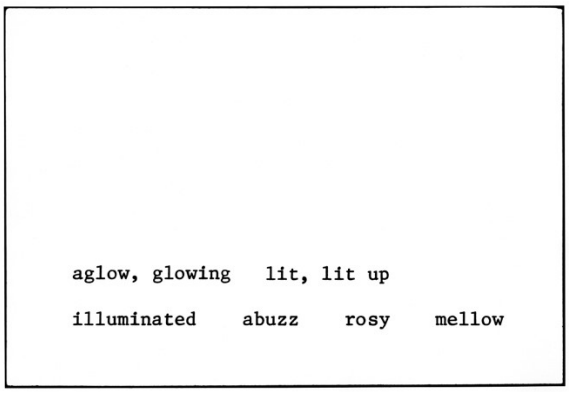

Figure 4. Initial texts displaying the following words:
"aglow, glowing, lit, lit up, illuminated, abuzz, rosy and mellow".

Another paradoxical realm witnessed in *The Bowery*, which augments its postmodern operative stance, belongs to the contradictory relational mode between the texts and the images. In this essay's endeavor at the interpretation of this paradox, two distinct pathways are open to our advance. In the first, the paradox can be seen in the fact that a few texts, three to be precise, in the collection are completely devoid of their corresponding images, whereas the rest of the texts are juxtaposed with their counterpart images. This, per se, is an obvious instance of contradiction or paradox, allowing for many interpretations to surface. Perhaps Rosler believes some words are capable of conveying certain sentiments well better than images. These three initial texts (Figures 3 to 5) are tasked with displaying the following words: "aglow, glowing, lit, lit up, illuminated, abuzz, rosy and mellow (Figure 3); high, exhilarated, elevated, happy, heady, hipped and het up (Figure 4); polished, shined, tipsy, primed, tuned, oiled, lubricated and greased" (Figure 5).

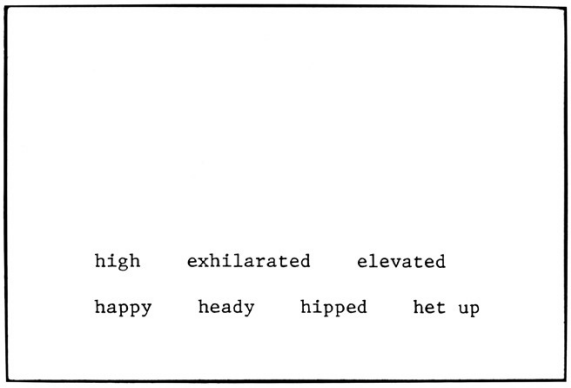

Figure 4. Initial texts displaying the following words:
"high, exhilarated, elevated, happy, heady, hipped and het up".

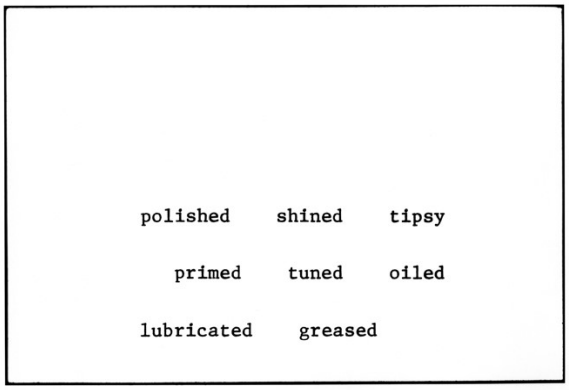

Figure 5. Initial texts displaying the following words:
"polished, shined, tipsy, primed, tuned, oiled, lubricated and greased".

A semantic contradiction pervades *the Bowery* as well. One vivid instance of a semantic paradox is at play between what the first three texts signify and how they correspond with the following two images. The majority of the words introduced above have a connotation of thrill and light implied by two word groups "exhilarated, elevated, happy, abuzz, and high" and "aglow, glowing, lit, lit up, illuminated, shined and polished", respectively. One might expect the ensuing images to have an air of light and excitement, whereas Rosler shocks the viewer with two dead-shut storefronts, exhibiting anything but light and energy.

Another instance of postmodern paradoxes can be viewed in the light of a political perspective. Postmodern paradoxes, Hutcheon argues, are integral to politics and vice versa. One cannot escape a political stance in interpreting a work of art if postmodernism is what one is aiming at. Let us now quote Hutcheon again: "postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. Its contradictions may well be those of late capitalist society…" [4]. Thus, Rosler tends to highlight politics and its paradoxes underneath her photography. *The Bowery* seeks to highlight the corrupt political system of this dystopian society as well as contrarily instilling hope and life in people for an unknown future. This is but a political postmodern paradox. Edwards's words substantiate the matter better: "*The Bowery* brings together the satirical and elegiac variants of pastoral. It savagely attacks the political economy of fiscal crisis that generated this dereliction and the humanist good intentions of photographers, while simultaneously facing towards a livable future [12].

Figure 6. Stressed the Past and Present: 1st

Figure 7. Stressed the Past and Present: 2nd

It is outstanding how both Rosler and Hutcheon stress the past and present, one as a visual artist and the other as a scholar or a literary critic. Hutcheon constantly speaks of the "presence of the past" in her postmodernist jargon, and Rosler extends the same terms even further to the future in *The Bowery. Bowery* is caught between a critical relation to the present and openness to the future. In so far as it can sustain distinctions between past, present and future, pastoral offers one aesthetic resource for this project.

In an extended account of the political postmodern paradox in a visual sense, one image alone speaks for the rest eloquently. The Figure 8, having the lamp and the illuminating accessories in the foreground, is nothing but a low-key portrayal of a closed store (Figure 8). This image is not only visually paradoxical in a rather ironic sense whose postmodern aspect will come to light later on but

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also conceptually paradoxical, in that the lamp and the chandeliers, which could be deemed to be an undeniably enlightening source, be it in literal or figurative interpretations, are incarcerated in a dead shut-down store window, thereby helping the formation of the dark dystopian wasteland called *The Bowery*. This example of the postmodernist paradox in *The Bowery* is not the only case, and other images, if meticulously investigated, could equally reflect a certain degree of the similar paradox.

Figure 8. The lamp and the illuminating accessories in the foreground, is nothing but a low-key portrayal of a closed store

It might not hurt, through the closing words of this section, to shed some quick light on another paradoxical facet of *The Bowery*. The majority of the words exhibited on the textual prints of the collection possess a past participle status, either via an -ed or -d ending such as "illuminated", "flustered", and "canned" or an irregular style like "lit", which could be considered a way of providing the viewer with a human attribution. Some instances are as follows: "exhilarated, hipped, het up, elevated, polished, shined, primed, tuned, oiled, lubricated, greased, bent, folded, steamed up…juiced up, tanked up, slopped up, sodden, soused, saturated, sloshed, corned, potted, preserved, canned, fried, gassed, buried, gone, drunk and pickled". On the other hand, to any viewer's amazement, the photographs are all devoid of human figures and features. In short, *The Bowery* paradoxically brings together the human-attributed linguistics (past participles) and human-free images.

4.2. Postmodern Irony and its "edge" in *The Bowery*

It is no secret that irony has invariably appeared to be an integral component of postmodernism, transcending its status to the best of its capacity. Irony has been food for thought for critics and, for the past few decades, rarely have there been two irony theorists who have concurred with one another in regard to the very functions for which irony stands. The present study is in no mode to go about irony in a detailed fashion, neither does it intend to leave it insufficiently attended, for it is in the light of the power of the irony that some unrevealed facets of *The Bowery* could come to light. This study is going to deploy Hutcheon's perspective on irony as its main theoretical framework in order to further grasp the postmodern rhetoric of *The Bowery.*

Having asserted at the very outset that her book is more targeted at a recap of the already existing notions of the irony along with her own inferential stance, Hutcheon delves into the most various references pervading this territory whose referents are as diverse as Jameson, La Capra, Bourdieu, Chambers, Deleuze, Eagleton, Hare, Levin and many others whose names are likely to stay unmentioned due to the restricted nature of this study. The most oft-repeated word in her theorizing approaches, should one have to choose, is the term "transideological". Hutcheon believes, with all certainty, the transideological nature of irony is what makes it essentially what it is expected to be: "And this, the transideological nature of irony, is the focus of this book: irony can and does function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests" [10]. What Hutcheon means by the term transideological is more in a political connotation: "As I have been arguing, the transideological nature of its [irony's] politics means that irony can be used (and has been used) either to undercut or to reinforce both conservative and radical

positions" [11]. Then, functioning as a double-edged sword, irony apparently works both ways. It heightens, and at the same time, it lowers any position, which makes a very efficacious yet vague tool out of it.

The lofty question, however, stays yet unanswered: Does irony seek to destroy or construct? Hutcheon does have a persuasive response to this question. She manages to take two camps into account. The first camp includes the people who "see irony as a powerful tool or even weapon in the fight against a dominant authority," which belongs to "feminist, postcolonial, gay and lesbian theorists", whereas the opposing camp whose members, by contrast, believe irony aims at negation and destruction, are the ones who have been "on the receiving end of an ironic attack (or missed the irony completely) or by those for whom the serious or the solemn and the univocal are the ideal" [12]. However, Hutcheon, some lines away, infers that these two functions are intertwined at the root and, therefore, one cannot have the negating nature of the irony isolated from the affirming one.

How does *The Bowery*, in the light of the postmodern account of the irony, namely its transideological state, fare? Or let us, for the sake of better reliability in addressing the issue in hand, take a step back and ask ourselves whether or not *The Bowery* is, at all, ironic. What is more ironic than the image of a typewriter captured at the center of a photograph beneath which a vodka bottle shines? Other than the fact that the typed words shall be read by the drunkards and the tramps (Figure 9). I would like to hasten to add the example of the image of the hotel (Figure 10), in a neighborhood where people do not have the slightest shelter, nor the economy to afford a shelter, much less a hotel. These two instances stand among the countless ironic and satiric intentions reflected by Rosler in *The Bowery*, not to mention the irony at the very heart of the textual section of the collection, such as the ironic tone adopted in the first three textual prints (an emblem of the light and thrill as discussed earlier) juxtaposed to the following low-key storefront images.

Figure 9. The Typed Words Shall Be Read By the Drunkards and the Tramps

Figure 10. Hotel in a Neighborhood Where People Do Not Have the Slightest Shelter

Speaking of thrill and light in a dystopian dark stretch of land called *The Bowery*, in the first opportunity of a hearing, will but provoke hysterical irony and satire. As Edwards avers, "On its own, a satirical attitude is ever likely to bowdlerise all genres and reinforce the irony and world-weariness that characterize so much of late-capitalist culture, while elegy (Socialist Realism) shades towards idyll and false optimism… *The Bowery* brings together the satirical and elegiac variants of pastoral" [12].

The Bowery, therefore, is ironic. Having come this far, now the question of the transideological nature of the irony, theorized by Hutcheon, can be addressed. *The Bowery*, via its political critique of the modernist capital society, undercuts and destroys and, through the instillation of hope and inspiration for the future generation of photographers and artists in general, reinforces and constructs. This is the very transideological reciprocity of which Hutcheon speaks and that which Rosler believes in. Hereby, Rosler sincerely sits akin to Hutcheon. The same thought has been echoed by Edwards: "*The Bowery* thus pulls in two directions at once, it is subtractive and additive" [11]. In all likelihood, when Hutcheon speaks of the inseparable tones of irony (constructive and destructive) and their deeply intertwined nature, she must have meant the same reciprocity of the constructiveness and destructiveness that was put into practice by Rosler. Indeed, undercutting is the price paid for reinforcement. Then, ontologically viewed, it is ironic when you speak of something (undercutting), but you mean something else (reinforcement). As Hutcheon states: "Attempts to theorize irony usually begin with some semantic definition of irony as involving saying one thing and meaning another" [13].

Similarly, Rosler expands this transideological account to the realm of photography. She portrays the inability of her photography and particularly documentary photography in capturing the moment, hence its inadequacy. Thus, through a cogent argument illustrated by photos, she transideologically undercuts or undermines the photographic values of the time in an attempt to accomplish a reinforcing or constructive change in an ironic mode to trigger a "revolution" [12] in the future of this art. A myriad of interpretations could come to fruition here, depending on the vision of the reader and the viewer.

What is the so-called irony's edge then? That *The Bowery* is replete with irony is indubitably accepted. Yet, the grounds upon which Rosler has resorted to the linguistic or verbal medium to get privy to the unvoiced mysteries of her mind as well as a critical view on *The Bowery* still remain in the dark. Some might hypothesize that the power of words and the linguistic media might outweigh the photographic values. Many justifications might rise herein. However, the true response seems to be tied with why Hutcheon coins the concept "the edge of the irony". To her, the verbal and structural authority of the verbal medium (words) can be, at times, so starkly sharp as to be called the "cutting edge". And this does not go unappreciated in the philosophy of Rosler. Apropos the ironic edge of the verbal medium, Hutcheon states, "perhaps it is what I want to call the "edge" that irony possesses in its verbal and structural forms that makes the stakes higher here than, say, in the use of metonymy. Even situational irony (and, with it, things like the irony of fate, cosmic irony, and so on) would not seem to provoke quite the same worries" [10]. The edge of Irony in *The Bowery* does, thus, hinge upon not only its highly risky (as Hutcheon calls it risky business) verbal linguistics but also the corresponding images whose interpretation might be as confusing as the words. In fact, most of the words in *The Bowery* are so rare, obscure, and absurd that one might practically fall into the risk of false or far-fetched interpretations, hence the ironic and risky edge.

4.3. Postmodern Parody in *the Bowery*

Another operating premise in postmodernism is parody. As the framework of the present paper has, to this moment, managed to turn to Hutcheon as its reference, the same is wished, henceforth, to be pursued in this portion of the essay as well. However, in order to have a multi-faceted grasp on the concept of parody, one needs to look back at the very conventional and non-postmodern definition of parody. This retrospective strategy provides a deeper and more tactful comprehension of the parody. As most general definitions of literary terms- the term parody in this study, however, is not used as a literary term but a postmodern component- are addressed with simplicity and tact in Abrams's glossary, then it is an apt preference to heed his words in this regard. In the words of Abrams: "A parody imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate

subject" [6]. Then, at the heart of the parody, to Abrams, lies the heavily comic mode of retelling a serious and perhaps a tragic or dramatic genre of literature and art.

Prior to stretching our line of words to Hutcheon's postmodern account of the parody, it is essential that one grasp the concept of pastiche as the most collocated and oft-juxtaposed term to parody. Indeed, many critics, postmodern or otherwise, tend to use the two interchangeably, despite their apparent differences. In *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Bennett and Royle, with a unanimous voice, hold that,

> Jameson also distinguishes between parody and pastiche. Both rely on imitation of earlier texts or objects. In parody, there is an impulse to ridicule by exaggerating the distance of the original text from 'normal' discourse. The postmodern, however, no longer accepts the notion of 'normal' language: pastiche is 'blank' parody in which there is no single model followed, no single impulse such as ridicule and no sense of a distance from any norm [9].

A line, albeit fine, is drawn between pastiche and parody by Jameson, rendering one indifferent and voiceless, while the other one, in a ridiculing tone, distances itself from the normal mode of the original text. This readily sits akin to Abrams's voice as well. Pastiche, however, is not the focal undertaking of this study, save for some minor sections, and the forthcoming words will solely address the concept of parody and its implications in *The Bowery.*

Parody, on a postmodern note, has to be dealt with distinct differences, though. Hutcheon addresses parody in both *the politics of Postmodernism* and *A Poetics of Postmodernism.* It is laborious to tease out one precise definition of parody, or one certain trend of its orientation, among the many arguments she eloquently develops. Yet, one thing that one could, with all certainty, assert is that Hutcheon diverges straightforwardly and ensemble from the very conventions that formed the previous parody thoughts:

> What I mean by "parody" here—as elsewhere in this study—is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. In historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity... [9].

Then, at the very heart of this parody lies a direct opposition to the classic and conventional parody thoughts, whose apologists presumed that a ridiculing essence was the epicenter of the parody. Instead, this position highlights the role of the irony and enacting of the change and cultural issues. Elsewhere, she emphatically asserts that postmodern parody aims at social discourse: "postmodernist parody, be it in architecture, literature, painting, film, or music, uses its historical memory, its aesthetic introversion, to signal that this kind of self-reflexive discourse is always inextricably bound to social discourse" [13]. Hutcheon, to recapitulate, believes parody is and should be a strategy that should not only distance itself from the regular ridiculing stance, but it also needs to include as many diverse facets as culture, society, and politics. As such, parody moves beyond its satirical stance and finds a more didactic and obvious performance. In regard to this aspect of parody, Hutcheon avers that "its[postmodernism's] paradoxical incorporation of the past into its very structures often points to these ideological contexts somewhat more obviously, more didactically, than other forms" [6]. This, however, is not to say that the classic parody was not didactic or had no function in this specific respect whatsoever.

On a brief note, it should be mentioned here that Hutcheon emphasized the very fact that parody has to happen from *within* a system rather than outside: "Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak *to* a discourse from *within* it, but without being totally recuperated by it" [12]. In fact, this is what she calls the *ex-centric* later.

In her *Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon does not fall astray from her previous parody perspective, and yet she further emphasizes the role of parody in being critical of what it parodies. This way, she opposes Jameson in aiming for pastiche or empty parody, stating that parody's voice is fervently resonant and critical. She finds no room for nostalgia, be it within parody or anywhere near postmodernist politics: "But this parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical" [11].

The common and stereotypical notions have already regarded postmodernism and its parody as a de-historicized value-free school of thought. Postmodernism, Hutcheon argues, is quite the opposite:

> "The prevailing interpretation is that postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own that is oversaturated with images. Instead, I would want to argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history of representations" [12].

Therefore, postmodernism, from her position, is meant to be value-oriented, historical, and political, not to mention the fact that it needs to be critical in essence, apropos anything that it parodies.

The Bowery corroborates the resonance of Hutcheon's postmodern voice on many miscellaneous planes. The parody of a certainly particular character, government, and narrative, as is often the case with the conventional parodic representation, is non-existent. Put simply, no name is given. Its parody, in the full sense of a term, questions the old-fashioned subjective parody. It goes without saying that it does not even provoke a minor smile, much less laughter, which normally comes as a result of the classic parody of a character or a story. Its critical tone, needless to say, subjects one to a serious air of locked-ness in the images. This parody locks the tone of its emission in much the same way as the images are severely locked within a serious framework. Postmodern parody, as Hutcheon posits, is in no mode of ridiculing a past event, hence no state of imitation and ridiculing in the photos in *The Bowery*. Instead, a close look at the images reveals a deeply objective and non-referential voice. The subjectivity, i.e., hints at or allusions to a certain person or thing, as is often the case with the classic and modern parody, is eclipsed by the postmodern parodic objectivity. Edwards seems to concur with this line of thought, stating that: "*The Bowery* may appear typical of much of the blank ascetic aesthetic of Conceptual art, or the non-committal irony, and absence of subjectivity or affect that characterized the art called 'postmodern" [6].

The concept of drinking and drunkenness in *The Bowery* is perhaps pivotal to the rise of its most critical parodic tone. Nearly all the images have an alcohol bottle or bottles somewhere at the base or around the corners. In fact, in Rosler's own words, "there is a poetics of drunkenness" [7]. The poetics of drunkenness in *The Bowery* breaks out to its corresponding linguistic mode as well. The text images either encompass the word "drunk" directly or its synonymous associations, such as "heady, fuddled, and lushy". Even if these words do not mean drunk, they, in one way or the other, have to do with being saturated with water or liquid. Some examples are "floated, soused, saturated and inebriated". This parodic tone in regard to drinking in *The Bowery* knows no end and meets its maximal rate through the ending text and photo images. The last three images must be the most explicit instances of this parodic portrayal for which Rosler stands steadfastly (Figure 11, 12, and 13).

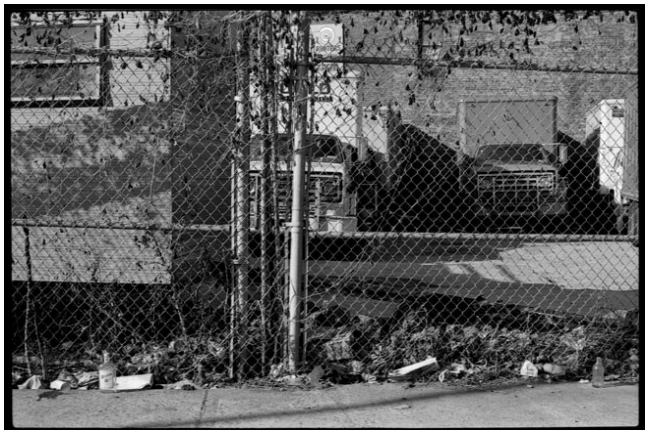

Figure 11. Explicit Instances of This Parodic Portrayal for Which Rosler Stands Steadfastly: 1st

Rosler's camera is as objective as the postmodern parody about which Hutcheon wrote a great deal. Rosler's dour camera is a fitting instance to exhibit the very quintessential values to which Hutcheon's postmodern angle of critical non-comic and non-committal parody tends to cling. Her camera delves into the *within* and captures the moments of the *within* rather than the *without*. She lays *The Bowery* bare from within to the eyes of the viewer and does not aim at portraying human images with which the viewer could identify, hence sustaining objectivity and consciousness. In fact, the parody of the drunk is an allusion to the objective consciousness whose nostalgic and patronizing stance, Hutcheon should argue, shall be eliminated by means of the photography from *within* as well as non-human images, as Edwards notes: "The drunk *is* also a figure of artistic consciousness in *The Bowery,* much more complex and troubling than anything to be found in the work of the Young British Artists of the 1990s" [5]. All these, hereby, give rise to a beauteous postmodern catharsis whose life hinges upon the critical tone of what it parodies, namely the socio-economic (capitalist) and cultural background of the so-called utopian (ironic) land called *The Bowery.*

Figure 12. Explicit Instances of This Parodic Portrayal for Which Rosler Stands Steadfastly: 2nd

Figure 13. Explicit Instances of This Parodic Portrayal for Which Rosler Stands Steadfastly: 3rd

The critical parody of the drunkenness in *The Bowery* is further solidified through the words of Taylor. He solemnly believes Rosler has captured the reality of the vaguely alienated streets of *The Bowery* to the best of her artistic skills, not to mention the strongly-felt semantics of the drunkenness evident both in the visual and textual terms: "Rosler took different representations aimed at capturing

the reality of drunks living on the streets of lower Manhattan and placed them next to, and made them critical of, each other" [12].

4.4. Documentary, Postmodern, Social and Victim photography in The Bowery

Is Rosler's *the Bowery,* generically viewed, of a documentary nature? Does it fit the profile of social or postmodern photography? In fact, one might boldly say that *The Bowery* does and at the same time does not act in concert with the above-mentioned terms. To a certain extent, *The Bowery* can be said to have shown itself as a mind-blowing conflation of most, if not all, of the generic or stylistic terminologies of photography. In *Photography: A Critical Introduction,* Wells seems to regard documentary hard to define:

> Documentary has been described as a form, a genre, a tradition, a style, a movement and a practice; it is not useful to try to offer a single definition of the word. John Grierson coined it in 1926 to describe the kind of cinema that he wanted to replace what he saw as the dream factory of Hollywood, and it quickly gained currency within photography. The word had an imperialist tendency, and rather different kinds of photography were soon being subsumed within it.

Wells, in bringing a touch of historical background, aims at a sequential pursuit of this genre which prompts him to use Ohrn's words in illustrating the documentary further:

> Although not rigid, these characteristics [of photography] serve as referents for comparing photographers working within . . . the documentary tradition – a tradition that includes aspects of journalism, art, education, sociology and history. Primarily, documentary was thought of as having a goal beyond the production of a fine print. The photographer's goal was to bring the attention of an audience to the subject of his or her work and, in many cases, to pave the way for social change [9].

Then, social change lies at the very heart of documentary photography. Wells, however, adds further components such as reality and the authenticity of the image to this definition, as follows: "Photojournalism and documentary are linked by the fact that they claim to have a special relationship to the real; that they give us an accurate and authentic view of the world". With the reality and the authenticity of the image comes the distinction or the skill of distinguishing the real photography from the manipulated photography, viz., the authentic from the inauthentic. In so doing, photographers came up with innovations such as "printing the whole of the image with a black border around it to demonstrate that everything the camera recorded was shown to the viewer" [9]. All these innovative techniques were targeted at controlling "the nature of a scene without making any obvious change to it".

Figure 14. Documentary, Postmodern, Social and Victim Photography in the Bowery: 1st

The Bowery, viewed in the light of the above-illustrated lines, happens to fall into the tradition, genre, and style of documentary, for Rosler does more than enough to keep true to the authenticity of

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Bowery as it is. Rosler, by way of remaining true to the realities of the neighborhood, not only unravels the corrupt layers of this so-called utopia but also triggers an unprecedented body of social change. The scope of her authenticity in her documentary photography, illustrated in *The Bowery*, is further substantiated once one takes into account the frames or borders around which she locks, be they in the textual or photographic medium, her images. In fact, technically viewed, her work is composed of frames whose images are strictly restricted by straight borders around them: "There are 24 frames or elements, and viewed as a storyboard…" [10]. Then, frames locked by solid borders are what Rosler has created to represent Bowery's reality and authenticity. She opted for this to demonstrate the reliability of her camera or, once again, "to demonstrate that everything the camera recorded was shown to the viewer" [9]. All the images of *The Bowery* abide by this. Some instances whose locked frames stand out are displayed in Figure 14, Figure 15 and Figure 16.

Figure 15. Documentary, Postmodern, Social and Victim Photography in the Bowery: 2nd

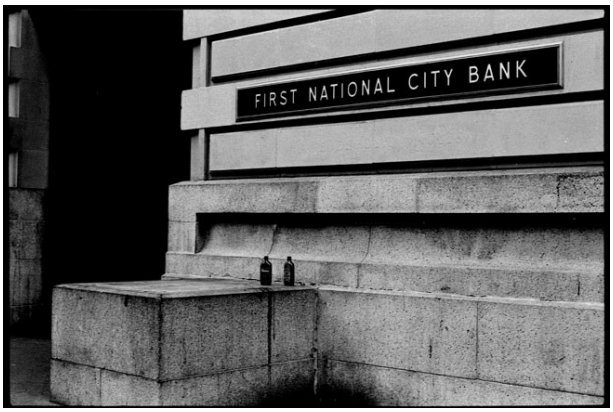

Figure 16. Documentary, Postmodern, Social and Victim Photography in the Bowery: 3rd

Postmodern photography surfaced to the stage of art in the 1970s. Looking askance at it, many photographers resisted the idea, while irrespective of this camp's disapproval, many others pursued it and transcended its status as well as its techniques. There is not one single clear definition for postmodern photography. In the words of Robin, postmodern photography is depicted as follows:

> To the 1970s camera people, realism belonged to the earlier history of photography and, as seventies artists, they were embarked on a different kind of aesthetic quest. It was not, however, the romantic symbolism of photography of the 1920s and 1930s, with its emphasis on the abstract beauty of the object, that had caught their attention, but rather a new kind of concentration on narrative drama, on the depiction of time changes in the

> camera's fictional moment. The photograph, instead of being presented as a depiction of reality, was now something created to show us things that were felt rather than necessarily seen [10].

Therefore, central to postmodern photography was the fictional drama of the camera and the sentimental values it instilled in the viewer. However, postmodern photography did not solely come down to this. This type of photography, in technical terms, relied heavily on constructed imagery: "Constructed photography included photomontage, staged imagery, image-text works, slide-tape installations, photographs derived from land art; indeed, any photographic imagery wherein the conceptual engineering of the artist is clearly evident" [8]. Furthermore, all the above-mentioned styles lend themselves to further depths of interpretation rather than take their concepts at face value. Constructed imagery critiques "concentration on the literal surfaces of things and on subject matter that seems to speak for itself" [12].

The Bowery, be it on an interpretational scale or a technical and developmental scale, falls into the genre of postmodern photography. It comes under the category of image-text works, which are a branch of postmodern photography. *The Bowery* is thus technically postmodern. Moreover, *The Bowery* is postmodern in terms of how it is interpreted. Neither the photo images nor the text images can be taken at face value. All images are in compelling need of contemplation and interpretation. Not a single image can be fathomed without Rosler's intentionally transcribed codes, which are indicative of her deeply provocative thematics.

Rosler herself, in line with the aesthetics of postmodern photography, is inclined to support a certain perspective, which does not fall far from the very lines composed above in this essay: "My understanding of postmodernism does not extend to the idea of a world with no coherent explanation of differential social power or advocacy of ways to right the imbalance. Explanation and advocacy are still viable in relation to photography, as in purely word-based journalism" (240). Rosler's postmodern explanations must be the same as the anti-face value thoughts on which the present essay shed some brief light earlier. That Rosler renders her photography prone to countless interpretations─ be they paradoxical or ironic─ is reason enough to accept the fact that her photography cannot be taken at face value, hence its postmodern nature.

Moreover, advocating "ways to right the [social] imbalance" is a voice that can never go unheard in *The Bowery.* It would feel right if one said this righting the imbalance could pose itself as the underlying motivation for Rosler to have created *The Bowery.* Therefore, social documentary photography, as another salient genre of photography, largely informs the workings of *The Bowery*. Social documentary has long been at the disposal of photography, lending its capacity to the betterment of capturing social injustice and imbalance: "Of all photographic practices, social documentary- the self-professed truth-teller, implicated in modernity and part of its "life world"—is the one in which the underlying issues of social power are accessible to contestation" (Rosler 210). This way, social documentary tends to sit akin to victim photography, whose major objective is to bear witness to the sorely and unjustly victimized beings of society, that is to say, the pawns whose lives are jeopardized by the ruling class or the warring parties. The rhetoric and the aesthetics of social photography hold true in *The Bowery*. It goes without saying that Rosler's concern lies in her persistent efforts to lay bare the true identity of The Bowery*,* its dystopian elements, its darkness, its drunkenness, and its social decadence. Perhaps *The Bowery* could be the most fitting venue for a social documentarian such as Rosler to master her art in hunting and recording the social facts or the "truths".

Victim photography is the site of controversy in *The Bowery.* Seemingly, Rosler questions the orthodox and conventional trends of victim photography. Victim photography is meant to photograph the social pains in terms of oppressors and the oppressed or victimizers and the victims. This thought seems to have lost its validity in the eyes of many thinkers and philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Kojeve. Rosler votes in their favor in her book:

Political scientist Robert Meister argues, for example, that post-structuralism- on the basis of readings of Nietzsche, as well as of Hegel by Alexandre Kojève and his students, among them Michel Foucault- radically questions the rhetoric of victims and victimizers. Post-structuralism, in Meister's view, rejects the "demonization" of any member of an oppressive system; thus, calling people victimizers, whether for their behavior or their class characteristics, is considered an unacceptable error, both analytically and ethically [9].

If Rosler stands against victim photography, how does she express this disapproval in *the Bowery*? In stepping away from victim photography, Rosler throws herself into a realm of photography which is bereft of humans. As the normal victim-oriented photography has it, victims such as war casualties, undernourished African children, the homeless, the drunks and, the addicts are displayed. One cannot witness such instances in *The Bowery.* As Edwards puts it, "Rosler is said to reject the tradition of victim photography in which the photographer inevitably functions as an agent of the system of power that silenced these people in the first place" [7]. Indeed, Rosler aims at an objective registration of the scenes in *The Bowery,* without the emotional or subjective effect of the human subjects with which the viewers could otherwise identify. Thomas Crow's words elucidate the case further:

The Bowery juxtaposed a series of strictly depopulated photographs of derelict storefronts with a running list of American slang expressions for drunks and drunkenness, from familiar to arcane, from the whimsical to despairingly bleak. The anti-expressive intensity in the combination of text and photograph defies both ordinary pathos and critical paraphrase [9].

Depopulated images are thought to be tantamount to Rosler's anti-victim photography inclinations. Rosler might leave it to the viewer to ascertain which yields better results: victimization or objectivization.

5. Conclusion

The present essay centered on Martha Rosler's *the Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-75). Apart from the basic features of *The Bowery* such as its setting and the grid as its structuring device, the essay was focally targeted at expounding the elements of postmodernism such as paradox, irony, and parody in *The Bowery*, particularly from the theoretical position of Linda Hutcheon. It can be inferred that the majority of Hutcheon's postmodern theories in the above-cited areas concur with Rosler's premises in *The Bowery*. The final undertaking of the essay was to examine whether or not *The Bowery* accorded with the documentary, postmodern, and victim photography practices. Consequently, it was concluded that *The Bowery* could be considered a combination of all photography genres and conventions save for victim photography, a type against which Rosler feels determined to stand.

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