
A Study of the Obey Propaganda Parody

How does the text conform to, or deviate from, the conventions of a particular genre, and for what purpose?

In 2003, the Bush administration launched attacks on Saddam Hussein after accusing the Iraqi government of possessing weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. Lasting until the end of 2011 when the Obama administration removed the last troops, the war in Iraq stirred great controversy across the globe. This controversy is depicted in this parody (Appendix 1) published by Obey Propaganda in 2005. The original image (Appendix 2) is a greeting card for Yellowstone National Park, capturing the spewing steam of Old Faithful and blue skies of the park; Obey changes this to portray the destruction in Iraq in the form of a parody of a greeting card. The steam holds the same shape but with context of the rest of the image, it is now depicted as the smoky aftermath of a bomb. The background where the mountains and trees were now contain oil drills and people caravanning on camels. The once blue skies are now an alarming red with rings of beige and added are four military planes and the Obey Propaganda emblem. The description of the card is replaced with one for the circumstances in Iraq.

Parodies typically consist of altered remnants of the original piece in order to create a humorous effect. The humor is often created through the use of irony and exaggerated language or images. For example, Monty Python parodies historical events like the Trojan Horse, having the men forget to hide inside the horse when it is presented as a false gift. This use of irony outlines the stupidity of the men in order to create a humorous response. Rather than creating a parody of the Yellowstone greeting card for the purpose of humor, Obey Propaganda parodies the card in order to create a sense of awareness and gravity for the war in Iraq, which follows the themes of their other pieces and purpose for existing – to create ironic awareness of acts against humanity and freedom by telling the audience to “obey” the oppressor.

The imagery and use of language in the piece makes it apparent that the company does intend for it to be ironic and dismal. The black color used for the foreground leaves an eerie image of Iraq, as the reader associates the dark color with the country. Also outlined in black are the camels and oil fields, a strike juxtaposition between the established culture of Iraq through the people riding camels and the newly invading oil drills that dominate the economy and politics of the land. Because oil is synonymous for trade between nations, particularly Western and Middle Eastern ones, the oil drills also represent the Western domination of the land that contrasts the isolated and preserved culture seen with the camels. This idea is further portrayed by the black military planes in the sky above the camels. Arabic is read from left to right, rather than right to left, so the piece would be viewed in the same manner, as it is a parody of a greeting card from the location shown. This would mean that the audience would first see the camel and airplanes of Western origin, an invasion of the culture only through airspace, then would pan to the smoke left from the bomb – a drastic and sudden annihilation of land and culture. Finally, the reader would see what is left from the destruction – oil fields that connect Iraq to the West and physically destroys its land. This creates a horrified and fearful mood for the reader, creating a sense of gravity for the circumstances rather than humor. While the original piece idolizes Yellowstone for its natural beauty, Obey condemns Western nations by showing their

destruction of Iraq's. Red is often used to symbolize danger, as it is in the sky of the greeting card, getting closer and closer to the ground and even overlapping with the oil fields on the left side of the image, representing the danger already present with Western involvement.

Font has a strong influence on the tone of a piece, and in this case it is used to clearly express that this is a serious parody, rather than a humorous one. The title, "Greetings from Iraq," has several fonts to reinforce the sense of grim irony. "Greetings," like on a typical greeting card is written in a cursive font that has a tone of extravagance. Next to it in small, capital, plain letters is "from," as if the author is using it as a tool to make the reader pause and see the stark contrast between "Greetings" and "Iraq," which is written with large, bold letters to create a serious tone. The most explicit use of language to reinforce the parody's purpose is the sarcastic quote at the bottom of the piece. Written in small, but bold letters, "Enjoy a cheap holiday in other people's misery" follows the company's theme of the author ironically being told to "obey" the oppressor. The audience is now aware of destruction and Western domination in Iraq, but is told to "enjoy" it, sarcastically encouraging the lack of action against the oppression and destruction. This command term also makes the reader feel a sense of responsibility for the destruction taking place.

While they do create awareness, humorous parodies lack the depth of emotion created by grim ones. The strong juxtapositions between the serene beauty of the original piece and the ruination portrayed in the parody surprise the reader to the extent that he or she is better able to remember the message of the piece and create a more developed personal connection with the issue at hand.