



Superhybridity: Gloopy Morass?

Superhybridity! How's that for a word? Reminds me of the 1964 Disney film's Mary Poppins word, Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious, which was the subject of a copyright infringement case based on the similar Supercalafajalistickeespealadojus song written in 1951 by Gloria Parker. Disney won (of course), his lawyers proving that versions of the word had existed prior to 1949. My new take on the word is Super-fragile-geriatric-extra-halitosis. But don't tell Disney.

I came across the word "superhybridity" in Sunday August 14th's NY Times Book Review, in a critique by Tom Payne of the book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction To Its Own Past*, by Simon Reynolds. The book sounds interesting but this word in particular grabbed my attention. Quotes the reviewer: "Superhybridity, a concept borrowed from an art magazine, exists because the internet can bring whatever we want into our hard drives, so that we can sample it or mash it up: no culture, from any time or place, can be remote from us."

After a bit of searching the internet, ironically, I found that the "art magazine" referred to above is called Frieze. The September 2010 issue had a cover article on "super-hybridity," featuring the contributions of a panel of artists and critics. At times it got a bit abstruse:

"Transdisciplinarity, which I would identify with the super-hybrid, occurs when an interdisciplinarity hybrid is no longer served by being reciprocal but transcends the limits of the original collaboration to create a third practice that is unforeseen..."

And there was dissention:

"There is nothing inherently positive about hybrid living if it means the uncritical acceptance of form, genre and content as one gloopy morass."

Coincidentally, that's what I had for dinner. But what is this concept of superhybridity? It obviously comes from "hybrid" which is, in its most general definition, "a composite of mixed origin." In the 1990s a theory arose, called "hybrid-

ity," that mostly concerned cultural interactions, which were said to develop, in various ways, an eventual cultural identity of "in-betweenness."

That's my unfairly brief description of the whole social, political, economic, racial, esthetic mix that makes up the theory, but there you go. The idea of "SUPER-hybridity," according to Jorg Heiser of Frieze magazine, concerns the tipping point where hybridity turns from a quantitative phenomenon (lots of people being "in-betweeners") to a more qualitative one, because of the incessant hodgepoding of the internet as well as such contemporary forces as the desires to break tradition, to eliminate xenophobia, and to extend the boundaries of perception.

This idea of in-betweenness extends all over the place. He describes one artist's superhybridity incorporating "a life between anger and equanimity, sociability and loneliness, city lights and desert, advanced tech-iness and the deliberately antediluvian." My life to a T, but I would include the areas between chewing and not-chewing, driving and riding, and dishes and laundry.

In any event, people seem to be suddenly extra interested in the idea of the border, the boundary, the junction, the splice, the confluence, the merge, the limit, the threshold. It's always been interesting territory, of course, with lines, sharp or fuzzy, straight or crooked, forever being drawn between good and evil, insanity and genius, collecting and hoarding, starving and fasting, obsession and addiction, old and new (I thought up a bumper sticker: "Dead is the New Old"), wise and clever, rich and poor, folk music and Americana...

I was introduced to a similar word by my biker/rock music professor/poet friend Marty a while ago: LIMINAL. This is defined as "of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition; in-between, transitional." I have heard this word used to refer to such concepts as twilight and adolescence. I have a hunch liminality's definition is at least related to superhybridity's, and I've heard the word used more and more lately. Everybody's edgy.

Edge concepts often figure into art, even in such prosaic ways as the leading in stained glass windows and the copper borders in cloisonne jewelry, or the dif-

fuse transitions of pastel. But the "goopy morass" aspect of superhybridity in art and music describes more sweeping "edge" ideas than those. It's more about the collage aspect of it all, the bringing in samples in music from existing songs, and photographs and drawings from sources downloaded from around the world and throughout recorded history, the bashing together and melding of all those heretofore separate works and their esthetics into one new jumble. And the jumbling itself being as much the statement as the jumble. Once again, the medium is the message. We're lucky YouTube can't do smells yet. The word "mashup" I've seen used to describe videos, songs and other artworks created using this sensibility. The picture frames are being thrown out and the old masterpieces shuffled like a deck of cards in a whole new conceptual fandango.

As you might guess, there are folks who think this is an awful idea in general and folks who think it's great. There are those who think this sort of thing has been going on in one way or another for centuries, while others think it began with the web. There are those who think it signals the end of creativity and those who think it is a brand new glorious and democratic flourishing in all the creative arts and in the societies beyond.

I don't know what to think, though it's a gas listening to the thinkers. And I do believe it's all quaintly related to many of the old discussions in the folk music tent. Is a folk song something to be mashed with other folk songs and reworked into a new superhybridization altogether, as Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan have done so well? Or should the boundaries be permanent, and songs sung as closely to how they were performed six hundred years ago? When you think about it, if you are to believe the oral tradition theory, there has been something superhybrid about folk music from the word go. Here, too, the whole gestalt of the mashup adds to its enjoyment. I think the rest of the art world is just beginning to catch up with folk music and folk art. So there. The only threshold beyond that is for everyone to learn how to make art as good as any four-year-old with a lipstick.

Frieze magazine: www.frieze.com
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