

## How useful is the notion of Carnival in analysing Popular Culture from medieval to present day?

At roughly the same time in history, Epicurus (Greek philosopher) and Solomon (Israelite king credited with writing Ecclesiastes) were espousing a view that as man did not know why he was born and what happened after he died, he should “eat drink and be merry”. This notion of reacting to powerlessness by celebrating is at the very core of Carnival and its influence on popular culture. Although it might be disingenuous to create an evolutionary link from 300BC Greece to the Middle Ages in England, there is no doubt that Epicureanism, or Hedonism as it later became known, was at the core of plebeian festivals in both eras. Perhaps, it is human nature, and perhaps that is why the essence of Carnival will always be relevant and prevalent whilst there is an oppressed or powerless community.

But what is carnival? To be able to track the influence of Carnival we must first understand it. In medieval, feudal Britain Carnival was an essential ritual for the powerless peasant majority, whose lives were pre-destined and whose future depended entirely on a successful harvest. Carnival provided a reaction to the precarious, poverty-stricken, humdrum existence of the masses, as Peter Burke puts it:

“It was opposed to the everyday, a time of waste precisely because the everyday was a time of careful saving.”

This suggests that Carnival was a time for suspending the normal rules of life, if only for a brief period, and opposing the cultural and sociological norms. This notion of the suspension of time is an important ingredient in Carnival. The feudal system more than any other included the debilitating power of pre-destiny, so that the average peasant felt he had no power to change his life. Carnival provided a respite from this, by offering a frozen moment when people could get off their pre-ordained treadmill. Burke goes on to describe Carnival in another way:

“Carnival was an enactment of ‘the world turned upside down’ a favourite theme in the popular culture of early modern Europe.”

In other words, by turning the world upside down, albeit in dramatic form only, the powerless could assume power. These notions of Carnival, being opposed to the every day, the timelessness and the inversion of normal power structures are fundamental to both its *raison d’être* and also its composition. And in the early middle ages we can already see reasons why the ruling classes would firstly be concerned about the power of Carnival and then go on to try and control it by bringing it within a religious context and calendar. Burke expands on this, describing how opponents of change frequently described Carnival as “subversive” in its ability to suggest an alternative way. This helps define the link between Carnival and popular culture by using social logic. Who wants to turn the world upside down? – those without power in everyday life – the populace. And who might resist such a move? – those with power. The idea of Carnival being used as vehicle within popular culture to challenge authority is noted by Michael Bristol:

“In general, plebeian culture uses Carnival and popular festival form as a critical rejection of the technique of hegemonic authority and of the legitimisation of all expropriation or radicalization from above”

In the periods Burke and Bristol were writing about, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Carnival was a well established ritual. Even though the latter period had seen the appropriation of Carnival by religious missionaries, it remained a clearly defined event, the main features of which involved grotesque excess, the exposing the pompous and powerful, and the cycle of birth, death and re-birth. Grotesque excess came in the form of eating, drinking, sex and defecation; in fact any activity involving the bodily functions in general and its orifices in particular. The cycle of birth, death and re-birth was important as it reflected the reliance on nature’s cycle for a good harvest each year.

Fundamental to Carnival and its influence on popular culture is the notion of poking fun at all forms of authority and exposing the absurdity of pomposity. The main tool of the trade was laughter, and particularly using it to be able to tackle subjects that may otherwise be problematic. Bristol describes it:

“The spontaneous, elusive and ‘harmless’ character of laughter makes it an extremely valuable resource and instrument in any social group that lacks power but seeks to retain a strong feeling of solidarity.”

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I would argue that 'harmless' is placed in speech marks by Bristol because it presented a harmless façade whilst at the same time being one of the most potent forces of Carnival in influencing popular culture. In addition to the therapeutic benefits, as Bristol describes, laughter provides a means by which the unimaginable can be imagined and the unsuggestable suggested. The raw material for this laughter was often the bodily functions so common in Carnival; Bristol goes further:

“These objects of laughter are not merely examples of the ludicrous. The human genitals and buttocks, what Bakhtin has called the ‘lower bodily stratum’ constitute the definitive category of laughing matter.”

A key ingredient in Carnival is the role of the fool or clown. “Fools and clowns doubled as characters and critical interpreters” performing a role on the inside and at the same time outside of the performance of Carnival. Fools evolved from participants in medieval times toward the role of social commentator by the time of the Renaissance. They remain one of the more enduring and visible elements of Carnival as we move into more modern times.

Carnival in England in its original format appeared to die out following the Renaissance period with the rise of Puritanism. In the battle between Carnival and Lent, the latter appears to have been victorious. As well as representations of this by Shakespeare with his Falstaff/Oldcastle character, Burke noted it as being a feature of Carnival itself:

“There is some evidence to suggest that battles between Carnival and Lent were not just figments of the imagination of Brueghel, Bosch and other painters, but were enacted in public.....The last act of the festival was often a drama in which Carnival suffered a mock trial, made a mock confession and a mock testament, and was given a mock execution, usually by burning, and a mock funeral”

If the writing was on the wall for Carnival, there is plenty of evidence that the carnivalesque continued to play a part in European cultures after the Renaissance and that it is still visible around the world today. And there have been plenty of carnival-style festivals since the Renaissance, some of which still form part of popular culture and are also influenced by Carnival. Events such as the Notting Hill Carnival provide a representation, if somewhat sterile and controlled, of some of the elements of Carnival. Likewise the Nice carnival, over 130 years old, which runs for two weeks each February and includes processions and parades and parties. I would argue that these do not actually represent popular culture, rather a hegemonic, tourist-focused spectacle. But it is not as black and white as that. A similar sounding carnival in a French town caught Michael Bristol's attention:

“In 1850, in the small town of Romans, the annual carnival turned into a genuine ‘people's uprising’. The rebels, mainly urban craftsmen and labourers, together with a significant number of peasants from local villages, evidently planned to murder the well-to-do landowners and the wealthy town merchants who lived as nobility.”

This led to the massacre of the leaders of the ‘uprising’. Bristol noted:

“Both sides had used the carnival of the previous year to symbolically act out and even rehearse the bloody encounters of the climactic days and nights of February 1850”

This extreme example of forum theatre demonstrates the potency of Carnival, as well as resonating with Augusto Boal's work on the role of theatre as a rehearsal for revolution for repressed and powerless communities.

Meanwhile in Britain, in Victorian times, the battle between Carnival and Lent was being played out in the battle between bourgeoisie theatre and popular Music Hall. Ultimately it was a battle again won by those with power who went on to make Music Hall respectable and part of the establishment. Before this perhaps inevitable conclusion, music hall had shown itself to be the place where popular culture, influenced by European notions of Carnival, could be found. As D. F. Cheshire notes:

“it was French example that led Symons and George Moore to treat the halls as symbolic of their revolt against middle class respectability.”

Cheshire writes about how music hall attracted, at least until early 20th century, the working classes, documenting the appeal of “its vulgarity and brash common touch”. G J Mellor, in his book *Northern Music Hall*, goes on to document how Music Hall's roots stemmed from the heavily-industrialised working class cities of the north of England, before being taken over by the establishment in London. The fact that so little detail is known about the early years of Music Hall would suggest it was for at least a while the domain of the powerless.

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During the same period in America Vaudeville was ploughing a similar furrow to Music Hall in the UK. It represented a facet of urban popular culture and exhibited similar carnivalesque elements, in particular grotesque acts, much laughter and rowdy behaviour, as well as the participation of the audience. Robert Snyder wrote:

“Ordinary New Yorkers embraced Vaudeville because it was familiar, because it spoke for and to them more than any other commercial entertainment medium”

Snyder’s use of the word ‘commercial’ recognised that even in the early days of Vaudeville, and despite its relevance to popular culture it was about making money. And inevitable exposure to market forces led the genre, like many other forms of theatre, to become part of the establishment that it had previously mocked. In spite of this it is easy to imagine, and Snyder describes it in some detail, how Vaudeville was able to utilise the carnivalesque to energise the powerless, multi-ethnic community of a city like New York:

“The Victoria’s shows also encouraged the rowdy audience participation that was frowned on in big-time Keith theatres, preserving some of the ambience of the old variety theatre. The Cherry sisters, billed as ‘America’s Worst Act,’ sang, recited, and performed dramatic sketches behind a net: it protected them when the audience threw vegetables and eggs.”

After World War II specific use of the carnivalesque was made by the French avant-garde playwright, Michel De Ghelderode. His extensive use of the grotesque was arguably limited in its influence on French popular culture of the time, in as much as it was set in the traditional environment of the theatre and was motivated, ironically, by the playwright’s bitterness at the lack of religious spirituality within society. However this period is recognised as being a time of theatre for protest, a voice for the masses, and Ghelderode’s work provides a clear interpretation of Carnival in its earlier manifestations. In describing one of Ghelderode’s works, *Marie la Misérable* George Wellwarth describes:

“Here we have a typical scene from the world of Ghelderode – fantastic, grotesque, bizarre, hypnotic: a subtle combination of the danse macabre with the lusty vulgarity of a Flemish peasants’ kermess.”

That Ghelderode employs the kermess, or carnival, in his work, suggests his recognition of ancient popular carnival as a solution to the problems of post-war Europe. Wellwarth goes on to describe how the notion of re-birth, in this case in *Mademoiselle*, is also a feature of Ghelderode’s work:

“Lazarus, for all of his repellent appearance, is embraced by Jaire and speaks lyrically of the beauties of death that will be theirs when his flesh bears fruit and flower in the spring”.

In the 1970’s in Africa, Wole Soyinka’s *Death of a King’s Horseman* described how Carnival was part of the culture of the downtrodden, native population. Firstly the ceremonial death is described as being the centrepiece of a Carnival to celebrate the continuous cycle required for life and (relative) prosperity. Excess is shown by the way the man chosen to die for his king, Elesin, is allowed whatever women and food he wants. The Praise Singer appears as the fool, providing narrative, chorus and insights into the events.

The Praise singer is reminding Elesin of his duty when he speaks as if he were the dead king. “I know the wickedness of men. If there is weight on the loose end of your sash, such weight as no mere man can shift; if your sash is earthed by evil minds who mean to part us at the last...”

This is an example of the social commentary provided by the fool, in the shape of the Praise Singer; he also appears as the narrator, telling the audience the story in verse. At around the same time in South America Augusto Boal was using the Joker system as a way of engaging a disenfranchised community. There is a clear link to be made here between world theatre in the 1970’s and the Middle Ages notion of Carnival.

I would argue that today it is easier to find examples of Carnival and its influence on popular culture in the developing world, where broad and identifiable definitions of the ruling and working classes still exist. In the developed world things are now much more blurred, with inherent social structures being replaced by a culture where money equals power and vice versa, and where the populace spends more and more time away from others, in their own home, watching TV. This has led to a question mark over the relevance of Carnival and its ability to influence popular culture. Bakhtin seemed to share this view, according to Gary Morson:

“For Bakhtin the ‘gradual narrowing down’ of the carnival’s regenerative power is directly linked to its separation from ‘folk culture’ and its ensuing domestication as ‘part of the family’s private life’. Nonetheless Bakhtin’s faith in the indestructibility of the ‘carnival spirit’ compels him to find it preserved, even in interiorized and psychological form...”

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The “carnival spirit” described by Bakhtin, is nowadays most likely to be found in the voice and actions of the protest. In this we see a reaction to hegemonic power by a disenfranchised community of interest in forms which draw on the carnivalesque. As Baz Kershaw puts it:

“If the carnivalesque is to contribute effectively to progressive change then it must be organisationally grounded in relation to wider cultural/philosophical movements. I would argue that in fact this happened in the successive counter-cultures in post-war Britain, particularly in the forms of celebratory protest, in such activities as, for example, anti-war marches, free rock-concerts, the Greenham Common fence decorations, Rock against Racism.”

In other words, celebratory protest is a way of turning the world upside down, poking fun at authority, and using song, laughter and rowdy behaviour to make the case for change. More recently, *Reclaim the Streets* has taken the carnivalesque further by organising “grotesque” events that are designed to empower the masses towards a community cause. These events are seen as grotesque by those in authority whose power is challenged.

The other place where carnivalesque still plays a major part is in community or alternative theatre. Proponents such as Dario Fo and Augusto Boal have developed whole new approaches to using theatre to mobilise the oppressed classes, in part by drawing on some of the traditions and aspects of Carnival. Here the carnival fool has evolved to be a facilitator or commentator and the audience does not remain shielded by a fourth wall, and is an essential part of a performance. Most importantly, this type of theatre suspends the norm and empowers performers and audience to imagine and play out an alternative world.

In summary, Gary Morson’s description of Carnival sums up both its representation in medieval popular culture and the values of the carnivalesque in more modern times:

“Carnival travesties: it crowns and uncrowns, inverts rank and exchanges roles, makes sense from nonsense and nonsense from sense. Its logic is ‘the logic of the turnabout,’ of ‘the inside-out’. It is the systematic parody of systems and points to the arbitrariness of all norms and rules”

A form of theatre that uses popular elements to turn the world upside down so that the powerless take power, if only in a dramatic way and for a limited period, has always been a potent weapon for the masses. Inevitably as “the masses” have become much harder to define in modern Western culture, compared to the stark contrasts of the middle ages, so Carnival itself has changed and evolved. As the world has become more complex so has our understanding of both carnivalesque and popular culture. And yet we still see strands of commonality from hundreds of years ago right up to the popular culture of the present day.

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