

Patrick Wright

Terrors of the Carnival

Carnival has been celebrated in postmodern discourse. Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque in particular has been the focus of much attention, even valorised by some critics, often lending weight to theories which extol respect for difference. However, the idea of carnival also has its darker side: the threat of social dissolution and violence; revolutionary impetus escalating into anarchy, sadism and psychosis.¹

It's my belief, as I've argued elsewhere, that the celebration of transgression and the subversion of authority can only be celebrated and subverted on the condition that one's place, social or institutional, is already secure.² To transgress for pleasure or to subvert creatively is, in other words, an act which can only occur within a position of power; and a person without such a privilege to begin with wants, often desperately, authority and conventions to be established. Human beings, particularly infants, first require cohesion and consistent laws and identifications before any interest in or desire for carnival – understood as the dethroning of authority or the overturning of hierarchies – arises. Whereas adults often find pleasure and humour in losing their inhibitions, such moments of abandon are often terrifying for the infant.

I wish to dramatically illustrate this idea with a personal narrative: a

¹ Critics who have celebrated the carnivalesque spirit include Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Its dangers, though, are better expounded in Julia Kristeva's work, which offers a more balanced and practical account.

² See Patrick Wright "A Timeless Sublime?: Reading the Feminine Sublime in the Discourse of the Sacred", *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Volume 15, Issue 2 (August 2010): 85-100.



story, if you will, borrowed from my personal repertoire of unconscious material; an archival fragment which, once juxtaposed with theory, reveals such theory as quite often a working out and, in turn, sublimation of what the infant senses; and my complementary dialogue between registers – the formal/academic and the literary/autobiographic – is there to render explicit the infantile basis, and continuum of the infantile, in academic discourse.

Carnival, to me, is not a place of fun and frolics, of high jinx and merriment; it is, rather, a place of trauma. The sight of floats, balloons, brass bands and games, the masking of faces especially, takes me back to an early experience where self and world, still nascent, in the process of taking form, were suddenly plunged into chaos. My first sight of carnival made anamorphic the hall of mirrors, which is, to all intents and purposes, our infantile universe.

I'm referring here to Lacan's idea of the mirror stage: a period in infancy when we form identifications with faces, objects, and a (gendered) body, which are then internalised as part of our identity. This imaginary set of identifications constitutes the later dimension of subjective experience (the ego), where the exterior world is mediated through a series of narcissistic perceptions of self and other.

However, working against this, like a circus mirror that distorts the body, carnival, with its parade of comic and grotesque forms, destabilises its spectator. If infancy is where the mirror stage takes hold (between eighteen months to three years), and it's here where the sense of self and other is established, then the spectacle of the carnival threatens to undo the work of identification and return the infant to the fragile state they were in previously: what Lacan refers to as the fragmented body (*corps morcelé*).³ Indeed, carnival, with its masking, staging – the mirror stage, incidentally, being very much a theatrical “stage” as well as a period of time – parody, its visible show, or making a show of the instability of self and other, draws attention to the realisation that the ego is an artifice: “I” is an other; the self is a masquerade; faces always wear make-up. And what carnival does is to make emphatic what we usually repress in early development: performativity; or, in other words, how self is inscribed by a permanent carnival of roles we each don in order to socially participate and assume an Oedipal subjectivity:

³ See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-32.

Patrick Wright

one that's sexed, repressed and subject to authority.⁴

One of my earliest memories is being taken to the annual town carnival by my grandmother. I was still in my pram, I recall, so I couldn't have been any more than three years of age.

She'd often take me on trips out, and usually it was to the park we'd go; and there, together with a cup of tea, we'd sit and watch crown green bowling.

I felt loved and protected. The world around me was a stable place. The park, with its smell of distant bonfires and tarmacadam, was serene: men ambling at a leisurely pace, smoking pipes in jackets, ties and flat caps. I knew from my previous visits what to expect.

Grandma would also take me to the market, and there wafts of odd smells would float my way: trout from the fish stall. Those fish looked like the strangest of monsters: an early sign of the grotesque. My eyes would go big as saucers seeing them. The scent of black puddings would also drift into my nostrils. My senses were overwhelmed with existence, and, quite often, things frightened me. Though, by and large, I felt secured and safely held.

If this wasn't stimulating enough, one day grandma thought, for a change, it would be exciting to take me to the town carnival.

From the very outset, after arriving, my eyes, ears and nose were everywhere. I wasn't sure what was happening. Curiosity was present, naturally – as the infant brain sponges the world around it – and so I was highly sensate and receptive. Though, more than anything, it was anxiety I was feeling.

And then, suddenly, out the clamour and brightness, the music and laughs, came something. At first it was just a shape. Even amongst the plethora of masks I knew it was real. Some primitive part of my mind let me know the thing moving was alive. It came at me imposing, a mess of form; a hulk of pulp.

Its face (I use that word loosely) was all wrong. It was, for a start, asymmetrical: its features, out of place, out of proportion, missing; the mouth gaping, in a permanent scream. It came at me like a white noise; a siren. It had to be a waxwork – but it lived.

⁴ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

AQC Kingdom Freaks & Other Divine Wonders

I jumped in my grandmother's arms. She wasn't aware until it was too late, and didn't protect me – so let me see more and everything, all at



Patrick Wright

once.

The face was like a Picasso painting, a Cubist marvel: eyes where there should be ears; ears where there should be eyes; just a small tuft of hair, too, belonging to a soul or being under all that dismay, which had, over time, accustomed itself to blameless shrieks, looks of pale upset and disbelief.

I was with my grandmother, too. Not with mother.

“Where’s Mummy? “Why,” I asked, subliminally, “is Mummy not here?” I had other questions too, like “Will she return?”, and “Where’s Daddy? Is that Daddy, over there, terrorising people?” “Will he return?”

Such thoughts stirred intense anxiety; a sense of falling forever, anticipating a fate worse than death. And here, at the carnival, was an ideal location to be scared out of my wits.

Through an estrangement of signs, the void behind language will often reveal itself, and this can be traumatic for the infant. For adults, in contrast, having recourse to an identity, the vacuity, though registered unconsciously (that selfhood is all a play), is veiled with laughter and gaiety, which work as a defensive screen against loss of meaning. Much like funerary rites mediating and often working as fetishes over the grim reality of death, the decorative aspect of carnival (its colour, its spectacle, its theatricality) lies proportional with the silent background of language, its nonsense of form, which signifies death in the unconscious.⁵

The mouth drooped vacantly in Quasimodo style. It hung gormlessly open and slavered. The body made it look human though, since, in itself, it was quite conventional: its form and its movement, especially, were life-like, the same as other beings I knew. So I had to accept the anomaly as something like me. I could see too that it had no protrusions and was no hunchback. Its gait had a slight limp, but otherwise it was just like any man in the crowd. Neither was it ragged or dishevelled in its appearance: it was smartly dressed, if anything, wearing the guise of civilization.

⁵ On the representability and non-representability of death, see Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York, Columbia UP, 1989), p. 25-26.