

CARNIVAL TODAY

Picturing Utopia

191

The trouble starts with the question. An essential trait of carnival is that it is by no means merely a beautiful fantasy waiting to be realized by social reform. Utopia itself is already lived out in its fullness within the carnival festivities; it is a real and actual, albeit temporary crossing over into the utopian realm. Carnival has no need for social reform to “realize” the ideal it all too concretely, grotesquely incorporates.

Carnival purports to paint the “end of history”, but its full reality is always actual, the end of history emerging as a break in the line of history or as a non-historical core around which history revolves and where its final goal is already achieved in its entirety as a festive living picture. Carnavalesque celebrations invariably claim to be a “return of the lost Golden Age” – but the only livable reality of the Golden age is in its full pictorial repetition. Carnival subscribes to a logic – described by many anthropologists of “primitive” or “archaic” consciousness – where the only true; festive; non-everyday reality lies in a pictorial enactment or repetition of an absent ideal, that is itself merely phantasmatically posited and whose “original reality” is, strictly speaking, irrelevant.

The ancients' festivities were not merely rituals of remembrance or anticipation of "the Dream-time", the chronotopos of myths – they were its true and only form of reality. If, as it has often been said, the heathen doesn't merely "take part" on the holy sphere – as the lesser reality of things "take part" on the higher reality of forms in the metaphysical universe – but actually fully embodies it in the ritual masquerade, this holds consequences not only for the heathen's seemingly miraculous direct access to the backstage of the world; it alters even more dramatically the way in which this backstage itself should be viewed. For if the carnival masquerade is indistinguishable from the original reality of the Golden age it claims to be repeating, does that not imply that the Holy sphere itself, the "Dream-time" that gives sense to all actuality, is a pictorial masquerade itself?

If the repetition is perfect, the reality of the original state the ritual claims to be repeating, is irrelevant: paradise regained, utopia in the flesh is here and now – does it really matter whether it was ever lost or even fully actual in the past? The Dream-time was "just a myth" even for the ancients. It was a working fantasy whose only function was to provide a formal reference for its pictorial realization. Our quarrel with the ancients lies not in taking the myth for "merely a story", while they presumably believed to be an accurate account of reality – rather it lies in missing the possibility of taking a consciously fictitious mere "story" seriously: not as a "good reflection" of reality but as a factor in its creation.

192

While is true that carnival cannot support itself without reference to fantasy, it tolerates it exclusively as that ghostly, half-visible and intangible material that is necessary to give birth to fully-visible, ambivalent and wholly livable pictures. Fantasies are necessary prerequisites of their own creative realization as living pictures. But they have to be realized as pictures. Ideology mobilizes fantasy by failing to do just that in two opposite directions: on one hand, it openly claims to intend to realize the fantasy in reality, "not merely as a temporary picture" but as a new, permanent social order to end all social orders, and on the other – completely fails to do so, because each real state of affairs fails to reproduce the phantasmatic vision in full and so stays a fantasy, a ghostly lure of an infinite march of improvement and sacrifice made in the name of the final attainment of its "reality".

Carnival consciousness can effectively disarm ideology by instantly realizing its fantasies as living pictures, at once making them embarrassingly concrete and ambivalent, fused with their own opposites and thus robbing ideology of its excuse for subjugation by proclaiming the goal attained. This was the role of carnival in relation to mediaeval catholic ideology: the extravagant carnival feasts embodied the return of the Golden age, which graphically mixed iconography of

both heaven and hell. This debases both the fantasy of the prize and of the punishment needed for effective ecclesiastic rule and thus renders the latter obsolete, for “the kingdom-come has come already”.

Yet, as has already been hinted above, although carnival is livable and cannot be reduced to a mere fantasy, it is not realizable as the banal reality of a stable social order either. One part of ideology is failing to realize ghostly fantasy in a fully visible, ambivalent and livable picture. Another twist of ideology is insisting on the necessity of realizing the livable, festive picture as everyday, common sense reality.

It is a twist that the great Frazer fell prey to in the main thesis of his magnum opus, *The Golden Bough*. There he insists that the modern carnival ritual of burning a “mere representation” of the king of carnival (usually a doll or a mask) is a more civilized, milder version of the primary, barbaric ritual which was centered around the ritual murder of a living scapegoat and can be documented in descriptions of cyclic rituals in the Roman and pre-hispanic American empires. In my view, it could not be clearer that the latter is a mere vulgar “realization” of the pictorial ritual – found not only in modern-time local folklore but also in ancient tribal cultures – typically practiced via secondary usurpation of tribal religion by an emerging imperialist state (e.g. the Aztec and Roman empires). The original sacrifice is the pictorial one, for, while the sacrificed slave of saturnalia merely *represents* god, the doll or mask of tribal ritual quite non-metaphorically *is* god. Within the carnival world-view, the higher realm of the holy is only present in the pictorial. From the perspective of the tribal masquerade, the ritual murder isn’t “fulfilling in reality” what they merely represent – rather it is seen as a technical mistake, as painting (i.e. producing pictorial utopia) with the wrong material of unpractical, messy flesh and blood. It would be like phallic singers of ancient Greece displaying actual erections.

Carnival is pictorial, but it is definitely more than an art-object. It is something that doesn’t merely produce utopia as an object of aesthetic contemplation, but as an actual parallel world in which to live, fully embodied – as a living picture. Carnival procedure internalizes aesthetic distance keeping us out of the work of art and shoves it in-between components making up man and world and turns the world itself into a picture, a picture that does not represent anything outside itself, but is an artistic installation made up of hacked up pieces of man and world. This is also the way Claude Levi-Strauss describes turning the world into livable mythography with the South-American Indians: myth isn’t a description of the world, it is an un-referring picture made up of artificially dissected world

parts. The world isn't the referent of the myth, it is the signifying material that makes it up.

Carnival utopia thus emerges whenever someone puts on a mask and he and the mask become god and cross over into the golden age of man. The Golden age is a masquerade; an objective world, hacked to pieces by so many small distances objectified in heavy, wooden masks and thus turned into a living picture, where enjoyment may take place.

But this doesn't mean carnival utopia is bound to a ritual or to a special festive time and holy place. It is a potentially permanent state of the whole world and the whole humanity. It is not even necessarily bound by the ritual usage of a mask and the use of a mask does not necessarily call it into being. A mask only works if it is conceived as the real face, as a truer identity of the person wearing it than the one he "actually is" in everyday life. And this festive displacement of the ego into the palpable object of the mask only serves to be able to construe all true identity as mask-like, as embodied in a tangible external object. In short – to construe oneself and the world as a dynamic picture.

194

What we are talking about here is not the new-romantic approach to the world as raw material for the ingenious subject to mold into his work of art. The latter is based in a deep and fascinating metaphysics of creative subjectivity, with the world – its things and subjects – being violently manipulated into a dirigible object in order to be recreated as a sublimely beautiful art-work from which its maker as an infinite source of ingenious, subjective creativity is radically and tragically excluded. Although the world has to be hacked to pieces in order to make a carnival picture too, the multitude of objects that form it are by their nature the very opposite of being manageable: they are "objects" precisely by their virtue of hard-headed insistence and unpredictability. The transcendent effect of excessive sense that never stops being produced in the grotesque plane of the carnival picture – in sharp contrast to the sublime beauty of the romantic Work – has its source not in the genius of an external creative subjectivity but in the internal, contingent and unpredictable crossings of wandering comical objects. Laughter holds a central place in the carnival world-view precisely because to enter the pictorial reality of its world one first has to become identical with a terribly tangible, comical object.

Managing Enjoyment

There is good reason to believe that the mind-frame of late consumer-oriented capitalism somehow represents the return of the carnival worldview. There is a

gross multiplication in entertainment practices that seem by their outer form only too fit to call carnivalesque, the laughs are a dime a dozen and even politicians seem to favor playing the people's fools to appearing rationally enlightened.

If the most basic social systems demanded renouncement of excessive enjoyment as destabilizing for the state and thus condemned themselves to a meltdown resulting from the boiling-over of the energy of forbidden pleasures, the wiser ones devised an escape-valve mechanism, which would, by temporarily allowing excessive enjoyment, keep the system safe from overloading. This was the case with the role of carnival in catholic society of the middle ages.

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, however, a revolutionary new idea on managing enjoyment in capitalism began to emerge. In contrast to the former solutions of excessive enjoyment management, which only sought to dispose of its destabilizing energy, consumerism found a way to harness it as a motor of its own proliferation. Now, excessive enjoyment is not merely permitted but actively encouraged. "Unnatural needs" are multiplied because they make up the stuff of badly needed new markets. The pursuit of pleasure is no longer seen as an opposing force to cultural conformation, but is openly admitted as its goal. This radically decreases tension between state and individual and renders all rebellion obsolete. If this seems too constrictive, one is even given freedom to rebel without a cause, an activity that is welcomed as yet another "customer demand" and met with appropriate consumer-oriented offers such as teenager malls, anarchist web-pages and communist bookshops. Free pursuit of personal ideals is welcomed both at the input and output ends of this self-replicating system: idealistic projects with "personal creative visions" have long become a hot item for long-term investment and the market is all too open for meeting increasingly diverse and personalized demand¹.

Why is this model not only nowhere close to the spirit of carnival utopia but also an increasing danger to its even episodic existence? There are several reasons, not immediately obvious. One is that this feeding back of excessive enjoyment into the functionality of the system, makes excessive enjoyment lose its edge, defined precisely by its dysfunctional character. Carnival utopia isn't a program of rational enjoyment management, it is a no-space of unmanageable, unharnessed enjoyment, a universe where energy is excessively wasted, gifted, and anarchically

¹ To be precise, this is the second model of positive management of excessive enjoyment. Its precedent is, of course, the already mentioned ritual organization of fascist imperialism found not only in ancient Roman and Aztec empires but also in their modern-day reconstruction-efforts, namely Hitler's Third Reich and Mussolini's Italy. With fascist imperialism, however, excessive enjoyment is vulgarized into bloody reality of the ritual murder and used as a public spectacle fueling the reigning power of the Empire.

spilled in witness to its bottomless and inexhaustible nature. This of course is precisely the sort of attitude of profitless dedication capitalism demands of its top producers: selfless giving out in endless creation is an investor's dream, the chance creation of original products that results as its side effect are the ideal cannon-fodder for an expanding market. But the number that the investor puts on cyclic creation is never adequate; its effort is immeasurable, at once worthless and invaluable. Consumerism needs the carnivalesque spirit like a parasite needs its host, but – like a parasite – it always risks taking just a bit too much from it and wages losing both its own and the host's life.

196 Functional harnessing undoubtedly has a crippling effect on non-operational creative enjoyment, because its fate is precisely to be non-operational, unusable, not to “function”, not to “work” – it is not meant to be banal reality but a festive living image. The “breath of life” consumerism has given to the “merely imaginary” and “merely temporary” carnival world by turning it into permanent functioning “reality” has caused it to lose the much higher reality of the pictorial and of the festive it once possessed in favor of the ever-present but banal reality of common, everyday pursuit of “personal pleasures”. The point of carnival's pictorial status is precisely that the picture plane is the only true reality there is, and that what poses as “reality” in everyday life is actually a construction based on the fantasy of a “banal real base” of pictorial presentation. The carnival world-view is free even of this phantom of reality as a base; it lives fully in the floating, freely suspended imaginary, where the Real is constantly present as a shift, flash or crack of sense-producing nonsense in the midst of pictorial life. Life in the pictorial plane is permanently festive, because it is bound together by the omnipresent matter of the procreative holy hole.

That is the reason for carnival's proliferation in the middle ages, when it was merely permitted. This should however, not mislead us to the view that carnival needs a restrictive society in order to oppose it. Carnival utopia in its historical occurrence is normally local and temporary and has no need for totality in order to reap the full harvest of its enjoyment. However, carnival by its nature does not rely on its status of an exception, but, rather, tends to a non-aggressive totalization of its world-view. It does not need normality and everyday life to sustain itself as their rebellious opposite – but rather, non-aggressively yet determinedly, tends to establish itself as a permanent state of the world as a whole. The expansion to which it gravitates is entirely non-imperialist – it is non-abstract – based in concrete bodily contact – and nonviolent – spreading with the unwillful contagiousness of laughter. Consumerism puts carnival in such peril because it creates a superficial illusion that its totalizing goal has already been achieved.

Medieval carnival thrived, because a minimal space undetermined by the system was all it needed to carry out its plan of imposing pictorial utopia as a permanent state of the world. Carnival did not agree with the government's view of its role merely as a release-valve: it carried with it a deep and all-embracing worldview of a permanent festivization of mankind. Its golden age was reached when the festivities had already taken up a good third of the working year with new holidays sprouting up like mushrooms. The crackdown was imminent and it was decisive. Public festivity was monopolized by the state and the only unofficial side of a holiday became its private domain. Carnival spirit, according to Bakhtin, sought refuge in the newly emerging private sphere of the bourgeois individuality, where it lost most of its utopian, universal and liberating meaning. "Popular" festivity had turned into the family holiday.

Privatizing Pleasure

This brings us to the other problematic point of consumerism's alleged carnival spirit. Not only has excessive enjoyment been harnessed into the reigning system of power, by way of its privatization it has also been denied access to any universal truth-value.

Because the more primitive models of society mentioned above are so restrictive about their members' conduct, leaving almost no space for privacy (see, for instance, Plato's or Thomas Moore's authoritarian visions of a utopian state), all of their citizens' conduct, carried out under the watchful eye of the state apparatus, has an air of universality about it. Late liberal capitalism effectively minimizes the restrictive role of the state and opens up a large space for virtually uninhibited activity within the domain of the private, whose content is, however, restricted by a complete lack of universal significance. Formally, the pursuit of personal happiness is the highest of liberal holies, but each concrete personal vision is absolutely denied any privileged access to the realm of the sacred and banned from imposing itself as a universal truth. Anything goes – vampire-wannabe gatherings, swinger societies, Star-trek fan-clubs – as long as it takes place between consenting adults and remains discrete, hidden from view in order not to cause offence with other personal visions that might oppose it.

All personal visions are naturally urged to enter the public market and circulate as goods, where their sole value is the market value, fixed with profitability and blind to the immanent quality of their content. The naturalizing effort of capitalist ideology insists on a democratic link of sense between the market value and the truth content of a worldview, arguing that this way the highest value will be attained by "what most people want". This however is based on a myth of the pri-

vate domain of personal taste as a real base of authentic desire independent of the universal domain occupied by the market and minimally restrictive state.

Personal desire is far from being a *terra firma* and taking the definition of desire as “the desire of the Other” seriously starts with appreciating the ideological power of conformation with a preferable worldview residing in marketing. Our own current private universes of desire were inevitably structured by various figures of authority during our upraising – *Bildung* works with transference – and the only chance for freedom lies in the active gesture of creatively taking onto ourselves the misunderstood gifts of other peoples’ desires, thus claiming the Other as our own product. Marketing plays on the same process, making it possible to non-violently implant prefabricated, Other’s desires into subjects by way of pedagogically suggestive images. This is why Plato doesn’t ban art completely from the state but merely subdues the communicative power of its sensuality to state ideology.

198

Art in general has the ability to make private visions into carriers of universal truth, to communicate the particular fetish as bound with the holy. We can, for instance, watch an Almodovar movie and feels his contingent personal fixations on ever recurring transvestites, loving mothers and bound, raped women temporarily stick onto us. But while marketing ends in successful transplantation of desire, pure art (its purity being merely its greater consistency with the principle of fetish migration underpinning marketing as well) results in a radical desubstantialization of all personal desire. The experience of migrating personal particulars of the artist opens me up for a view of the contingency and unfixeness of my own personal particulars: desires, fetishes the whole lot, become radically that of *no particular other*. Through art all “personal taste” comes loose from its subjective fixation and enters a universal domain uncontrolled by any “official” universality of the market or state. Utopia is not letting us “do what we want to”, condemning us to solipsistic hell of being stuck with our own random desire, utopia is an open, unofficially public space of mutual interaction where we might formulate our particularity in constant contact and friction with equally set particularities of others.

This is what carnival is: a becoming-art of life, a space of utopian universality where all personal fixations, desires and fetishes meet in open communication, mock-war and collective feasting. In everyday life, glimpses of this world are offered through relations of love and friendship. In factual modern society the model for the ideal social unit lies not with the private club of “people with a common interest” but with a *feast of friends* with enormously diverse interests and beliefs, gathered purely by the always contingently based fact of friendship.

Incidentally, in my view this is also the desired model of philosophical discourse: not effectively separate cliques of phenomenologists, lacanians, analitics, etc but an impossible common space of festive meeting, where we all agree merely to be talking about the same thing: the truth. Carnival functions as a spreading of this principle of friendly familiarity to the potential totality of an entire world.

The insistence on the “people” as the subject of carnival is not to be taken as a sign of vulgar populism on Bakhtin’s side. Bakhtin’s “people” is not a particular social class, but an impossible, utopian totality of the world’s humanity, an “other scene”, where every individual regardless of social class invariably takes festive part. “The people” serves precisely to signify this seemingly lost space of *unofficial sociality*, of *universal particularity*, where each man may participate with a ridiculously tangible part of his most intimate being. “The people”, normally a term of exclusion, signifying the opposite of “me”, is here a name for that opaque spot at the core of my individuality, where I am “everybody”, where “the I is someone else”. While carnivalization of the world, as opposed to the externality of social reorganization, can be said to have the status of an internal mind-shift, it cannot be reduced to mere “individual enlightenment” as far as the shift itself consists precisely in identification of the most intimate with the de-individualized, public and even more radically external dimension of the “people”.

It is a dimension of unofficial sociality where all particulars may meet on the flat plane of a pre-capitalist, mediaeval market that was the scene of carnival. The carnival market is a concrete, material public space, where everything is visible and where there is “no privacy”, but which also lacks a unified judging eye condemning some and blessing others. Like on the capitalist market, everything that enters this mythical plane of the people is deemed contingent, rootless, beyond good and evil. But in its case this *debasement* is not itself *based* in reduction to market value. The particulars entering the picture plane of the carnivalized market are utterly baseless and at once irreducible; based in themselves and thus universal in their own partial, hol(e)y content. It is a space-time of constant festivity as the only true, pictorial reality. It is a space where enjoyment, neither banned, allowed or dictated, but entirely free in its uselessness can ecstatically give itself, free of charge, in abundant excess, and, superfluously pouring over the edge of the pictorial world – unreduced either to a measurable market value or to a private particularity – give birth to universal, yet creatively produced; grotesquely palpable and only in ridiculous, laughable form transmittable *truth*.