

Anarchy in the UK

'70s British Punk as Bakhtinian Carnival

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In July 1998, the British weekly newspaper *The Observer* ran a fashion feature with svelte models sporting cut-up cashmere tops photographed against the work of the punk graphic designer Jamie Reid. Most notable was Reid's image for the infamous *Sex Pistols* ' song "God Save the Queen" (1977) showing her majesty resplendent with safety-pin. Aside from perhaps a wry postmodern reference to the American *Vogue* (March 1951) fashion shoot which featured Jackson Pollock's work as a back drop, it illustrates the recuperation of certain elements of '70s British punk, its status now, for some, as a form of radical chic and a style among others.

Although conscious that writing about punk in an academic context could be considered as further assisting the process of co-option, the intention here is to re-assert and re-frame punk's radical and more intractable features by drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's well-known notion of carnival. It will be suggested that there are not only strong affinities and parallels between many aspects of punk and carnival, but that the former can to varying degrees be legitimately considered as a reincarnation of the latter. Indeed, it is germane to locate punk within the carnival frame. For, as Robert Stam notes: "Bakhtinian categories display an intrinsic identification with difference and alterity, a built-in affinity for the oppressed and marginal, a feature making them especially appropriate for the analysis of opposition and marginal practices ..." (21). The aim of locating punk within the carnival tradition then, is to redefine and redeem its many subversive features, and in addition, to open up the discourse on punk which in general sees it as an episode in the history of British pop music, a youth sub-cultural phenomenon, or as a manifestation of postmodernism.

Bakhtin's Carnival

The carnival for Bakhtin essentially represented a Utopian impulse marked by the oppressed's contestation and momentary release from the strictures of the established order. In his seminal *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin writes, "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (10). This liberation and articulation of Utopian or egalitarian ideals is accompanied by the subversion and demystification of the conventions, symbols, and values underpinning the established order by such devices as inversion and parody. It also involves the transgression of social norms and propriety by the avowed and frequent use of obscenities and stress on excess and corporeality. The carnival is thus an anarchic semiotic and somatic realm. It also represents an oppositional culture which emerges and operates at the interface of the frictions and periodic collisions between official and popular discourses acting, as Stam notes, as "the privileged arm of the weak and dispossessed" (227).

However, Terry Eagleton has observed that the carnival can be "a licensed enclave" (149), a sanctioned ritual which functions as a safety valve for popular discontent and a subtle form of social control. Yet, in certain circumstances it could be genuinely interactable and threatening with wider effects. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that "for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclic ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle* (14; authors' ital.). Moreover, although most of its traditional forms have long been repressed, fragmented, and neutered regulation and commodification, according to Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*, "the popular-festive carnival is indestructible. Though narrowed and

weakened, it still continues to fertilize various areas of life and culture” (33–34). The carnival spirit although attenuated still exists, then as a disruptive and regenerative undercurrent which one must carefully listen out for. Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* argues that “[t]he sensitive ear will always catch even the most distant echoes of a carnival sense of the world” (107).

Indeed, some commentators such as Tony Bennett and Tom Sobchack have discerned “mutated echoes” (147) or “traces” (180) of the carnivalesque in post-war British society and popular culture. In this context, rather than a coherent oppositional culture, it is perhaps best seen as an adaptable repertoire, “a resource of actions, images and roles” (18), as Stallybrass and White put it, which the disaffected can use to voice their discontent and aspirations. For John Fiske, “the carnivalesque may still act as a deep modeling of a pleasurable ideal of the people that is at once both Utopian and counterhegemonic” (101). British punk of the ‘70s can be seen as representing a return of the repressed; a resurgence and recasting of long-suppressed yet irreducible elements of the carnivalesque in a clash between disaffected youth and official discourse against a backdrop of political and economic crisis, and heightened class tensions.

Punk and Carnival

On a general level, punk displays strong affinities with the carnival in its make-up and attributes. Punk’s protagonists were generally underdogs: a motley ensemble of mostly disaffected working class youths and art school malcontents. Stewart Home writing in 1991 states that “*kids on the street*” saw punk “as an expression simultaneously of frustration and a desire for change” (81; Home’s ital.). While never having a coherent ideology or systematic political project, punk certainly exhibited anarchic, libertarian and Utopian tendencies with roots in popular culture and—for some—iconoclastic avant-garde movements such as Dada. George McKay argues that punk was “an oppositional impulse” marked by “the language of Utopia desire” (5). Bakhtin’s outline of carnival’s project in *Rabelais and his World* could also serve as a description of punk’s project “to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (34).

Punk as a phenomenon like carnival was fluid, heterogeneous, and transient, marked by irreverence, dissent, and symbolic resistance through music, dress and behavior. Punk questioned decorum and subverted the conventions of fashion, typography, and above all those of the music industry. Various, by demystifying creativity and the production process with its egalitarian message of anyone-can-do-it, a rhetoric of amateurism, raucous style, and inclusion of new and often taboo-breaking topics such as unemployment, consumerism, the police, and royalty into songs. Punks, Dick Hebdige argues, “were not only directly *responding* to increasing joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscovery of poverty, the Depression, etc., they were *dramatizing* what had come to be called ‘Britain’s decline’ by constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth...” (87; Hebdige’s ital.).

There are correspondences here with Bakhtin’s notion of “dialogism,” a complex shifting concept which may be basically defined as the articulation and interplay of “*other* voices.” Essentially, these are voices in opposition to, excluded by, and excluded from monologic official discourses.

Carnival is framed by dialogism. Punk opened-up a carnivalesque dialogic space for the voices of the disaffected and marginalized, whether working-class, local, regional or female. The latter, sometimes functioned in conjunction with feminist politics as in bands such as The Slits and The Raincoats. Mavis Bayton notes that although not totally free from sexism, “punk allowed women to voice their anger and frustration with the sexual status quo, by singing about hate, writing angry songs or specifically anti-romantic lyrics” (66).

Furthermore, punk in its practices not only contested who could speak and what could be said but also *how*. Songs and publications like fanzines were shot through with transgressive grammatical errors, slang and swear words. Such “elements of freedom”—as Bakhtin termed such language in *Rabelais and his World* (187)—challenged the linguistic conventions of official discourses, in particular hegemonic middle-class “Standard” English, as did punk’s assertion (often verging on self-parody) of working class speech and its rich idioms. As Simon Frith observed: “Punk singers like Johnny Rotten developed an explicitly working-class voice by using proletarian accents, drawing on football supporter chants, expressing an inarticulateness, a muttered, hunched distance from the words they plucked from the clichés of public expression” (161). This is analogous with “the carnivalization of speech,” the irruption of earthly everyday language, taboo topics and *others’* “truths” into official discourses.

Other carnivalesque tropes such as wordplay and inversion are prevalent in punk, for example, the inclination for bizarre names: “Rat Scabies,” “Tory Crimes” and “Poly Styrene”. The Clash’s song “Hate and War” (1977), inverted the ‘60s hippy slogan “Love and Peace.” Parody too, was a prominent weapon in the punk arsenal. Dave Laing in 1978 noted that the words of the Sex Pistols’ song “Holidays in the Sun” (1977) are “a kind of collage of media and travel brochure clichés and parodic references to them clustered around the media themes associated with Germany—Belsen, ‘reasonable economy,’ the Berlin Wall. Wrenched out of their place in what might be called the *Daily Mail* discourse, the clichés sound empty and ridiculous” (127).

Indeed, the conflation and mixing of diverse elements and distinct realms often to deflate and ridicule—what Bakhtin calls “misalliances,” a transgressive promiscuity—is also at the heart of carnival. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, he writes: “Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant” (123). Such an attitude is central to punk and strongly informs its *bricolage* aesthetic, most evident in a visual style marked by incongruous combinations, for example, tu-tu’s with Doc Marten boots. As Neil Nehring notes, “The ensemble that made up punk style involved the appropriation of artifacts and texts regardless of their origin and a quite purposeful courting of outrage and condemnation every step of the way” (316).

A subversive mixing, especially of the high and low, to shock and mock is most evident in many punk texts. Among many examples, one might note the Sex Pistols’ alternative national anthem “God save the Queen” (1977). Laing, writing in the journal *Marxism Today*, saw the song as “an especially effective blow against ruling class propaganda” (124). One can also note Jamie Reid’s aforementioned montage-style graphics which defiled the monarch’s portrait by the establishment photographer Cecil Beaton. Another good example is a cover of the punk fanzine *Jolt* which featured a rather crude copy of the salacious boudoir painting *Sleeping Women* (1866) by the French realist Gustave Courbet with one of his lesbian nudes replaced by an image of the priggish media watchdog Mary Whitehouse.

Participation and Egalitarianism

Jon Stratton argues that punk was a re-configuration and reassertion of a long repressed and subversive working class “aesthetic of emotive involvement” (33). This aesthetic is characterized by active participation, hedonistic pleasure, and the loss of self in an experience of communion, as opposed to a Kantian-bourgeois aesthetic of individualistic and reasoned pleasure. Indeed, punk was marked by ardent collective participation manifest in the do-it-yourself production of music, clothing, graphics, and fanzines. However, such an aesthetic is perhaps most evident in the Dionysian-like punk concert, in particular front-of-stage activity (a precursor of the ebullient “Moshpit” of the later popular music scene) and is one area where punk perhaps comes closest to the carnival. Caroline Coon at the time noted that punk audiences “collectively deal out a no bullshit vibe, underpinned with good humor. They jeer and boo at the bands as much as the bands feel free to insult the audience... Participation is the operative word” (14).

With its alcohol and amphetamine-fuelled cathartic frenzy, almost “oceanic” crush, stage invasions, irreverence for performers and audience alike, “pogoing” and “gobbing,” the punk concert is an example of collective *jouissance*; a display of excess and disorder where rational control is relinquished and differences between subjects and the distinctions between audience and performers, stage and street, are blurred. At his first punk gig, Philip Hoare noted that “there was no pit between the stage and floor; like a medieval mystery play or a chivalric tournament, nothing stood between the audience and participant. There was little to distinguish the one from the other: just a shower of spit and sweat and ear-crunching amphetamine noise” (354). This temporary overturning of the traditional relationship between audience/performer and enthusiastic participation was seen as one of the most subversive aspects of punk. Hebdige observed: “It was in the performance arena that punk groups posed the clear threat to law and order... the groups and their followers could be drawn closer together in a communion of spittle and mutual abuse” (110).

Heady participation, close bodily contact and a suspension of the division between performers and spectators are all key features of carnival: its avowed egalitarianism and assault on hierarchies and controls. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin writes: “Freedom and equality are pressed in familiar blows, and coarse body contact... no separation of participants and spectators. Everybody participates” (265). And like carnival, punk events too attracted official censure and repression. Martin Cloonan notes that “Punk gigs were subject to a degree of censorship unparalleled in British popular music history” (174). Punk here also performed a carnivalesque-type expose and demystification of the entertainment industry. As Laing noted in 1985: “One of the most significant achievements of punk was its ability to lay bare the operations of power in the leisure apparatus as it was thrown into confusion” (xiii).

Moreover, although not totally free from hierarchies and divisions (for example, “hardcore” punks/part-timers and London/provinces), carnivalesque spirit of egalitarianism based on communality and close and familiar physical contact does pervade punk and its self-imagery and is a key constituent in its self-definition. In photographs (for example the work of Erica Echenberg), fanzines, and record sleeves, audiences and fans all feature prominently. In the revelry of carnival as in punk, there is, Bakhtin argues in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, “free and familiar contact among people” (123), the reinforcement of collective identity, as Tzvetan Todorov observes, a temporary dissolution of “the individual into the collective action of the crowd” (7). Here, the

crowd becomes the earthly and unruly social-body of the people; an avatar of the grotesque body.

The Grotesque Punk Body

The grotesque body is central to the carnival. It is the popular resource, the nexus and embodiment of a set of “negative” oppositional values such as disorder, filth, unrestrained pleasure, and ugliness. It stands in stark contrast to the distinct, finished and authoritarian “classical body,” the model for traditional aesthetics and social order since antiquity. The transgressive grotesque body is a mix of heterodox elements, incomplete and open to change. Nor is it separate from its social context. Orifices and protuberances, mouths and noses, penetrating and expelling actions are all emphasized. Bakhtin writes in *Rabelais and his World*: “Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world...” (26). Here the body is literally opened up to the world and represents a liminal zone. As Renate Lachman notes:

The main principle of the official semiotics of the body is the concealedness of the body’s insides. By contrast, carnival semiotics allows the inner realm to enter eccentrically into the outside world and vice versa: it stages the penetration of the outside into the bodily insides as a spectacle. The boundary marking the division between the body’s insides and outside is suspended through the two movements of protruding and penetrating. (150–51)

Contra the monadic, hermetic classical body and its progeny the sanitized/fetishized body of consumerism, the disorderly punk body can be seen as a variant on the grotesque. In the protean and spectacular punk body, the apparently impervious façade of the classical or disciplined consumer body which underpins ideals of unity, control and autonomy are countered by a fragmented *bricolage* aesthetic an carnivalesque double movement of penetration and protrusion. We find highlighting and symbolic violation of corporeal boundaries and interpenetration of the body and world in punk’s ripped and slashed clothing, often exposing naked flesh, stress on zips and seams, and in actual self-mutilation and scarification, and with “irrational” adornments to the body tattoos, nose and mouth piercings. Moreover, the wearing of undergarments such as singlets and bras on the outside turned conventions and the “body” inside out.

Other protruding punk *accoutrements* such as studded dog collars, chains and bondage straps not only allude to an oppressive society and attitudes toward truculent youth as animals to be controlled, but also represent a carnivalesque refunctioning of commonplace objects “contrary to their common use” (411), as Bakhtin notes in *Rabelais and his World*. One should note here the use of safety-pins (an exemplar of the double movement of penetration and protrusion) for puncturing and disfigurement rather than repair, and bin-liners as apparel, a mark of extreme self-depreciation and re-coding of the body as trash. All this and a penchant for intrusive spikey hair and behavior such as vomiting and spitting stresses the punk body’s alterity, corporality, and intertextuality with the world.

For Bakhtin, “the essence of the grotesque” is the mask. It is a signifier of “change and reincarnation” and represents “the violation of natural boundaries” (39–40). Moreover, the mask sug-

gests an archiac form that resonates with otherness: “Even in modern life it is enveloped in a peculiar atmosphere and is seen as a particle of some other world” (40). We find a version of the grotesque carnival mask in punk facial disfigurement or decoration, the use of garish, clownish heavy make-up evoking destabilizing androgyny and proclivity for grimacing in its attack on decorum and dictated notions of beauty and femininity.

In carnival and the grotesque body there is also a tradition of degradation, a salutary bringing down to earth often through an emphasis of what Bakhtin calls “the lower stratum of the body” (180). This is essentially the body’s “baseness” epitomized by the belly, birth, and excess bodily pleasures, as opposed to idealist notions of transcendent “higher regions,” that is to say, the head, the locus of reason. The grotesque body and degradation are also the basis of what Bakhtin termed “billingsgate” – abusive language, curses, and profanities, part of the carnivalization of speech which in modern forms harbors “[a] vague memory of past communal liberties and carnival truth...” (28). We find a playing-up of “the lower stratum” and a penchant for billingsgate in punk; in the cultivation of a dirty unkempt look, lewd behavior, the valorization and liberal use of obscenities, and in the many crude bodily references in songs and group names such as “I Can’t Come” (1977) by the Snivelling Shits, often informed as Home noted in 1995, by “smutty music hall traditions” (53). Exemplary and well-documented are the scurrilous antics of the Sex Pistols, the grotesque punk band *par excellence*: a micro-carnival in themselves.

Yet there are some aspects of punk, which sit uneasily with carnival. Despite the proclivity and oppositional stance, it was deeply marked by discursive negativity: nihilism, despair, (self-)hatred and a cynical laughter more akin to what Bakhtin saw as the unregenerative “cold humor” of Romanticism (38). Punk’s “apocalyptic” cry of “No future!... Destroy!” is at odds with the dialectical nature of carnival: abasement *and* affirmation, destruction *and* renewal, and its overall celebratory thrust.

Yet despite such differences and the ineluctable co-option of its more easily assimilated features, punk is imbued with a carnival spirit, its tropes, and oppositional carnivalesque strategies. In its under-dog status, ideals of communality and egalitarianism, alterity, heady misalliances, and assaults on propriety and convention, punk can be seen as a reincarnation of the carnival. Indeed, Bakhtin’s description of the admittedly transitory achievement of carnival could serve as a fitting epitaph for British punk of the ‘70s: “For a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of Utopian freedom” (89).

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