Carnival Politics and the Territory of the Street

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Introduction
In this paper I want to explore the politics of carnival, which, unlike the widespread and often facile use of this concept (and of its correlative, the carnivalesque) leads one to suspect, is far from unequivocal. As a popular cultural event that places itself on the borderline between politics and aesthetics, the carnival’s political function is not always immediately obvious and I want to argue that its occasional political efficacy may result precisely from this inherent ambivalence. Carnival plays out differently depending on its socio-historical and cultural contexts, so that any sweeping statements about its politics are problematic. Instead of claiming a single political direction for carnival in general, therefore, my discussion will focus on two specific, modern incarnations of the carnival. First, the Notting Hill Carnival, a Caribbean-inspired cultural festival that, since 1965, has taken place every August on the streets of the Notting Hill area in central London, manifesting itself as a site of black British identity constructions. Second, the Carnival Against Capital manifestation held 18 June 1999 in London’s financial district as an openly political expression of the anti-globalization movement. Both events appeared as territorial battles over the streets of London, attempting to set up a rival construction of its space and time to the official one; a rival construction that is explicitly designed to critique dominant racial and economic structures.

My exploration of these two distinct events will be correlated with a theoretical consideration of the carnival, developed most importantly by Mikhail Bakhtin in Rabelais and his World. In name, both the Notting Hill Carnival and the Carnival Against Capital speak directly to Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, but neither reiterates it in an identical or unproblematic manner. Rather, as I will show, they appear as translations and displacements of the Bakhtinian carnival, effecting what Deleuze and Guattari call a deterritorialization: a movement of acceleration, rupture, change and multiple connectivities. Both events quite literally answer the injunction of A Thousand Plateaus to “increase your territory by deterritorialization” (12), demonstrating how deterritorialization is not the overcoming of territory but inextricably intertwined with territory’s appearance as an ongoing process of contestation where control is always only momentary and...
provisional: “there is no deterritorialization without a special reterritorialization. . .no flow, no becoming-molecular escapes from a molar formation without molar components accompanying it, forming passages or perceptible landmarks for the imperceptible processes” (334). Because the carnival and its territories of resistance can always be reappropriated, each carnival event – and each individual iteration of a particular carnival – needs to be considered in terms of its historical and cultural specificity. Hence, I will focus not so much on establishing equivalences, but on examining what the differences between Bakhtin’s carnival and its two modern incarnations can tell us about the divided territory of carnival and its politics.

The Notting Hill Carnival

Today, the Notting Hill Carnival, which takes over the streets of what used to be a predominantly immigrant neighborhood in central London each August Bank Holiday Sunday and Monday, is a largely commercialized festival attracting not just a black following, but white British spectators and tourists from all over the world. Its established status was confirmed when, in 2002, it was included in the Queen’s Golden Jubilee procession. Notting Hill itself has undergone a process of gentrification, which became even more pronounced after the enormous success of the 1999 romantic comedy Notting Hill, starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant. The Carnival’s first decades, however, were turbulent; its history deeply intertwined with that of post-war immigration and British racial politics.

The Carnival originated as a way to bring the black and white communities of Notting Hill together and improve the area’s reputation after the race riots of 1958, sparked by the racist attack by a gang of white youths on a Swedish woman married to a Jamaican man (Younge). In the words of its founder, Rhaune Laslett, the festival was motivated by an attempt “to prove that from our ghetto there was a wealth of culture waiting to express itself, that we weren’t rubbish people” (qtd. in Younge). By designating the Notting Hill area as a “ghetto,” Laslett points to the Carnival’s primordial relation to issues of space and territory: a ghetto is an area occupied by a minority group not in a positive gesture of appropriation, but in a passive mode of resignation and also an enforced form of segregation. Ghettoes are territories controlled by authorities, not by their inhabitants. Against this, Laslett indicates a desire to use the Carnival as an active tool to redefine both the neighborhood and its people by replacing negative, disenfranchising characterizations with positive, enabling ones: culture instead of rubbish, wealth instead of poverty, community instead of minority. After a small in-door event organized in St. Pancras Town Hall in 1959, the Notting Hill Carnival took to the streets in 1965 and quickly evolved into a distinctly West Indian or black festival modeled on the Trinidad Carnival and attracting a growing number of visitors (Younge). In 1976, when the Carnival erupted into riots, it became, in Paul Gilroy’s words, “a watershed in the history of conflict between blacks and the police and in the growth of the authoritarian forms