

How Was Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnival Represented in the Disobedient Objects Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum?

In 2010, with the inauguration of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, a new wave of protest and demonstration swept across Britain. Demonstrators took to the streets in the thousands to stand against austerity cuts to services such as teaching and the NHS, as well as – most famously – the removal of the cap of tuition fees in England and Wales, which broke promises made by Liberal-Democrat politicians and provoked a vast student-led demonstration at Whitehall in November 2010, dominating media coverage. This was followed by the London Riots of 2011, and global momentum in the Occupy movement. In the wake of these protests, a curious phenomenon occurred in public art museums, who began to display exhibitions of a political nature. The most prominent of these being the “Disobedient Objects” exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum – a display of objects made and used in the front lines of demonstration and protest from the 1970s onwards – curated by Activist-studies specialist Gavin Grindon, and V&A poster and graphics archivist Catherine Flood.

The writing of Mikhail Bakhtin holds a certain significance here in its conceptualisation of the public sphere and its capacity for inciting renewal and change, through the unruly processes of human nature and interpersonal relationships. Gavin Grindon has also published several articles linking Bakhtin's carnival and street protest, with the exhibition serving as a large-scale creative research project.

In this essay I will examine the relationship between protest and Bakhtin's carnival as described in his book “Rabelais and His World”, drawing from other theorists who referenced Bakhtin in writing about resistance and the public sphere. I will then give an analysis of the Disobedient Objects exhibition and how this theoretical model is represented through curatorial processes.

Bakhtin's Carnival

“Carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense, carnival can be seen, above all, as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal.”¹

Mary Russo, *Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory*

Mikhail Bakhtin's “Rabelais and His World” has served as a seminal text for theorising the aesthetics of political resistance, and the construction of desires in the public sphere. As well as *conceptualising* the public sphere as a space for desire and dissent, “Rabelais and His World” stood as a literary space of resistance in its own right; completed in 1940, with Bakhtin having spent 6 years in political exile for his group-based activism following the Russian uprising of 1917, his theory of the carnival undoubtedly made subtle reference to the struggles and (often alcohol-fuelled) violence of the Russian lower-classes following the famine of the late 19th century². Bakhtin's carnival – based on a study of French Renaissance parody writer François Rabelais – has thus come to be recognised as an

¹ Russo, M. J. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 62. Print.

² Figs, O. *Revolutionary Russia, 1891-1991*. London, UK: Penguin Group, 2014. 10. Print. Pelican Books.

anecdotal model of resistance seen in the practice of street demonstration and protest, as examined by writers such as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, Raoul Vaneigem and Hakim Bey.

The carnival takes a utopian form as it opens a space for all members of society to come together in festivity, where all walks of life interact with no hierarchy, united by an ambiguous laughter – an element Bakhtin describes as key in understanding not only Medieval European history's development, but also the structure of a "preclass and prepolitical social order". This laughter is to be seen in three forms: the ritualistic spectacles of comedy shows and pageants; comedic verbal parodies; and the language of the market place in which informal foul language is used amongst peers. Each of these carnival forms gives the body of the people a space in which to seemingly descend gleefully into the depths away from the ruling ecclesiastic orders, a space described as the "second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance"³. Equality and abundance are key here as acts of desire and rejuvenation – a "rebirth" of the world in the face of the overarching ruling powers, dominated by scripture, hierarchy and regalia. This raw and organic public sphere consists of the body ("purely human relations" of "the lower bodily strata") and *as* the body in metaphor, with Bakhtin analogising the carnival as the body of a senile, pregnant, old, hag. The sexual organs of the old hag reminding us of the carnal desires of the human being, as described by Mary Russo in her Feminist critique of Bakhtin's carnival:

"...This view valorises traditional images of the earth mother, the crone, the witch, and the vampire and posits a natural connection between the female body (itself naturalised) and the "primal" elements, especially the earth".⁴

This metaphor aims to give sense of a zone where death and birth meet; the old, withered and crazed body of the crone edging towards bursting into new life, which is somehow different, and yet the same – as is the cyclical motion of revolution, motivated by a raw internal drive.

This combination of laughter and raw, grotesque desire in a gathered public space provides us with the ingredients for an unruly public body, but also demonstrates to us the development of public political forces through-out history. In the medieval period that "Rabelais and His World" describes, the carnival was a designated festival at specific times of the year according to the calendar of the church⁵ (this pattern was also seen in the Peasant activities of pre-Revolutionary Russia during Christmas, Epiphany and Shrovetide⁶). It was during these times that the lower-orders were given the freedom to openly rebel against, and mock the church as long as the joking element was made clear, as Marjolein t'Hart explains:

"Despite the risks that such events could get out of hand, political protest was usually allowed in these ritualised settings – or rather, the cost of suppressing it could turn out to be too high, as repression itself might provoke an escalation of protest. Likewise, in royal courts, a jester could express critical thoughts about policies without fearing punishment by the ruler. His peculiar, ritualised position carried immunity. Even nowadays professional comedians can present harsh and undesirable political truths through laughter: their position as official joke-makers makes them

³ Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, MA: M. I. T., 1968. 6-9. Print.

⁴ Russo, M. J. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 1. Print.

⁵ Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, MA: M. I. T., 1968. Print.

⁶ Figes, O. *Revolutionary Russia, 1891-1991*. London, UK: Penguin Group, 2014. 10. Print. Pelican Books.

different from other political critics. After all, “fools” should not be taken seriously and replying in a serious manner to a joke is generally “not done”.”⁷

This laughter was often closely accompanied by forms of abuse towards the higher orders represented through the body of the clown, a practice described by Vaneigem as a metamorphosis of the king, through rituals of unmasking and stripping him of his disguise⁸. This abusive, comedic chaos provided Bakhtin’s medieval constituents with a zone in which to unleash the full force of human desire, with all of its rage and carnal urges, before the festival ended and life would resume as normal under ecclesiastic rule. It is here that we see Bakhtin’s carnival as a truly political component, as it provides a geographical allocation of behaviour (the geography of the social sphere as a body), in order to assume control over The People from the higher orders above.

As mentioned above, this public sphere was thoroughly reconstituted throughout the development of European history, particularly in the 18th century - as examined by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their book “The Politics and Poetics of Transgression” – so that the public would internalise aspects of good behaviour through processes of silence and shame⁹. This was much akin to Foucault’s claims of the period’s implementation of a network of forms of control through “remedies and therapeutic devices...such as the segregation of the sick, the monitoring of contagions, the exclusion of delinquents”¹⁰, despite the 18th Century often being referred to as an era of liberation. This arguably led to a newly defined construction of social class in the form of the bourgeoisie and the Other, through a rejection of the carnival whose carnal rages then continued to exist through *sublimation* of the body (an aspect which Stallybrass and White criticise Bakhtin for due to his acknowledgement of this sublimation in his writings but lack of explanation). Indeed Stallybrass and White discuss later on in the book how Freud conjured the carnival and the grotesque in his hysterical bourgeoisie patients through methods of abreaction and would assist them in overcoming their grotesque terrors through laughter¹¹. This therefore demonstrates to us that the carnal spirit of the carnival was not something consigned to a specific period in time, but instead belonged to the constitution of human nature and can be seen throughout history conjured in the cycles of revolution. This cycle gathers momentum and rises again and again through the prompting and harnessing of the spirit of the carnival in an organised body of peoples – the people consigned to the realm of the Other. And it is this notion that can be seen across history in the rhetoric of political groups, agendas and manifestos – a significant portion of which manifesting around the 1960s at the same time as “Rabelais and His World” being translated into English¹². A key and more recent example is Hakim Bey’s call for the Temporary Autonomous Zone - or T.A.Z – which specifically focusses on creating and occupying designated spaces for the communities of the Other:

“We are always looking for “spaces” (geographic, social, cultural, imaginal) with potential to flower as autonomous zones – and we are looking for times in which these spaces are relatively open,

⁷ Hart, M. C. 't., and D. Bos. *Humour and Social Protest*. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the U of Cambridge, 2007. 5. Print.

⁸ Vaneigem, R., and D. Nicholson-Smith. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Oakland, CA: PM, 2012. 197. Print.

⁹ Stallybrass, P., and A. White. "The Grotesque Body and the Smithfield Muse: Authorship in the Eighteenth Century." *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986. 84-85. Print.

¹⁰ Foucault, M., and Colin Gordon. "Body/Power." *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon, 1980. 55-56. Print.

¹¹ Stallybrass, P., and A. White. "Bourgeois Hysteria and the Grotesque." *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986. 172. Print.

¹² Russo, M. J. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 56. Print.

either through neglect on the part of the State or because they have somehow escaped notice by the map makers, or for whatever reason. Psychotopology is the art of *dowsing* for potential TAZs".¹³

In the next section I will examine the ways in which the recent histories of carnival as political model were represented in the V&A following the mass of London-based protests of 2010.

Disobedient Objects

"In that inevitable taking of sides, our project turns to objects that open up histories of making from below. These objects disclose hidden moments in which, even if only in brief flashes, we find the possibility that things might be otherwise: that, in fact, the world may also be made from below, by collective, organized disobedience against the world as it is"¹⁴.

Gavin Grindon and Catherine Flood, *Disobedient Objects*.

July 2014-February 2015

On the exterior of the illustrious Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington's Museum Square, hung a mosaic-like sign depicting people with fists raised to the riot gear-clad police officers around the words "Power to the People", with another sign depicting the words "History is a Weapon". Upon entry to the museum, past the compulsory bag checks at the marble steps and columns, the viewer was confronted with the grand, circular reception area and over-looking balconies adorned with classical sculpture and religious iconographies, and just past this hung the wire-framed sign, "Disobedient Objects".

At first glance to the unknowing eye this show could have been a simple survey of objects, collected and classified, as is the usual custom in a museum such as the V&A. But these are no ordinary objects, they are the spearheads of a public-body in action. These banners, posters, masks, costumes, barricades, vehicles, puppets etc. are the vessels which scream the drive of the collectives, whatever form those drives take.

The exhibition was split into object-based categories; banners, masks, barricades, and so on, each of which was detailed by written descriptions of the objects displayed, with its function, purpose in action, and examples of its use, often through photographic form. A series of hand-outs accompanied the object-categories, with bright yellow Do-It-Yourself infographic instructions for the viewers to tear off from paper-pads on the wall in order to make their own Book Bloc shield, for example, alongside images of balaclava-clad students being beaten by Metropolitan Police officers in a cloud of smoke¹.

There was a curious method to the display of the objects, which - whilst the exhibition space consisted of the classic white cube walls - were suspended from vertical steel poles, stemming from floor to ceiling, creating a crude and raw cage-like effect in a make-shift fashion, with chipboard plinths at varying heights and compositions. More confusing still was the layout of the displays and whether or not there was a planned route for the viewer to be led through the exhibition - as is the expected norm within a museum special-exhibition space. Time frames seemed to cross over, as a Greenham Common Women's Liberation Against Nuclear Weapons quilt hung above a red hand-

¹³ Bey, H. T.A.Z.: *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. 2nd ed. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1991. 101. Print.

¹⁴ Grindon, G., and C. Flood. *Disobedient Objects*. London: V&A, 2015. 7-8. Print.

held sign spray-painted with the words “I Wish My Boyfriend Was As Dirty As Your Policies” – which became an iconic emblem of the tuition fees protest of 2010.

It is fair to say that the exhibition could have been seen as an intervention in the space and practices of the V&A – what Hettie Judah described in her Art Review magazine article (somewhat critically) as “soul searching” on the part of the museum. Not only were the classical practices of exhibition-making altered in the space with makeshift plinths and raw materials, but the viewer and, arguably, the museum are forced to consider the agency of an existing object; what it *is* and what it can *do*, for it is through these means that the objects create the aesthetic of their given spheres. It is important to note here that whilst the objects may have been the same in their *objecthood* – i.e. fitting into Grindon and Flood’s aforementioned categories - none of them looked the same and there was no grouped aim amongst the protests represented. The causes shown varied from the New York Guerilla Girls in 1989, to the 2007 Heathrow Climate Camp, to the anti-austerity protests in Greece in 2013 (which could be seen as a somewhat arbitrary method of collecting). Many of the protests and demonstrations represented are fairly recent dating within the past 15 years or so, largely due to practicalities in that few objects would have survived from earlier protests. This is because – argue Grindon and Flood - the objects are deliberately designed to be quick, cheap and easy to make. Their very existence is formed from a rush of emergency and instantaneousness – an element highlighted with great importance by Hakim Bey when considering the eruption of a Temporary Autonomous Zone, describing spontaneity as crucial. Indeed, even in the accompanying literature to the exhibition, Grindon and Flood introduced their curatorial research project with an analogy of Hercules and the Hydra of Lena, with the former representing the higher orders and the latter representing the lower, repressed “long-lost history of the multi-ethnic classes essential to the making of the modern world”¹⁵; the recurring battle of the Other shown through the explosive regrowth and multiplication of the Hydra’s severed heads. An image, perhaps, not too dissimilar from Bakhtin’s senile, pregnant hags in their relentless rejuvenation.

In many reviews and in much discussion, the exhibition has been – quite rightly – questioned over its placing of “active” objects in a museum. After all, the museum is an institution devised in the 19th century following the reconstituted sociological traits described by Stallybrass, White and Foucault earlier on in this essay. In his book “The Birth of the Museum” (heavily inspired by Foucault’s “The Birth of the Clinic” as the title suggests), Tony Bennett describes the museum as being:

“...involved in the practice of “showing and telling: that is, of exhibiting artefacts and/or persons in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meanings and values. They are also institutions which, in being open to all-comers, have shown a similar concern to devise ways of regulating the conduct of their visitors, and to do so, ideally, in ways that are unobtrusive and self-perpetuating”¹⁶.

The white walls of the museum create an uncomfortable home for these objects, whose political agencies are inherently fuelled by movement and insurrection in their (we shall call it) “natural environment”. It is, therefore, by definition a contradiction in terms to represent such artefacts through the science of museology, and should by rights, bring the action to an end, as Philip Fisher describes when examining the life process of the warrior’s sword in to the museum:

“As a final stage of the sword’s existence, all groups of this [original] culture are destroyed by a higher civilisation whose learned men take the sword to a museum, where they classify

¹⁵ Grindon, G., and C. Flood. *Disobedient Objects*. London: V&A, 2015. 8. Print.

¹⁶ Bennett, T. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1995. 6. Print.

it along with cooking implements, canoes, clothing, statues, and toys as an example of a cultural “style” by contrast to the “artefacts” of other cultures or earlier or later “stages” of this style”.¹⁷

The curators, perhaps in their own disobedience, have attempted to refute this, as is evident through their processes of curatorial decision-making. As opposed to the usual didactic practice of curator as story-teller (which Fisher’s excerpt creates an image of), Grindon and Flood worked directly with activist groups in a series of workshops to devise the structure of the exhibition cooperatively. It was also intended that once the exhibition had ended the objects would “return to active duty”¹⁸ – creating an open-ended collecting process, and a respect for and sensitivity to the object as an extension of person-hood, or rather, people-hood.

As well as this, the aforementioned DIY print-outs – while at first possibly seeming a little too much like a not-for-profit pastiche (the same could be said for the chipboard and bars) were actually available online via an accompanying Disobedient Objects blog (which is still live) as free downloads, and have since been used globally in action – most famously by the American Black Lives Matter movement during the Ferguson unrest in 2014¹⁹.

Conclusion

Through an understanding of Bakhtin’s carnival as a venue for the political primal drives of a body of people, and as a model of the divisions of political spaces seen through rituals of laughter and developments in modes of control through-out history, Grindon and Flood attempted to articulate the disruptive spontaneity necessary in forming a radically political public zone. Through a somewhat arbitrary collecting process across the history of protest, the curators demonstrate that it is not what the cause is that is central to the cycle of revolution, but that there must be a cause in order to ignite the spirit of carnival in a public body. By placing these active objects within a historic museum of decorative arts and crafts, the curators expose a contrast between classified artefact-object and object of the Other. Along with this, by creating an open-ended life span to the objects involved, this breaks with the museum’s role of hyper-collecting, and recognises the objects as alive and active. By placing the free, easy to use DIY infographics online for all to use, Grindon and Flood turn the model of the exhibition on its head and plant a seed that at any point can become inflammatory and part of a new Temporary Autonomous Zone – such is the movement of carnival.

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¹⁷ Fisher, P. "Art and The Future's Past." *Museum Studies: An Anthology Of Contexts*. Ed. B. M. Carbonell. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Pub., 2004. 437. Print.

¹⁸ Judah, H. "Disobey! When Protest Objects Are Exhibited In One Of The World’s Grandest Museums, How Does It Change The Objects? And How Does It Change The Museum?" *Art Review Summer 2014*. Print.

¹⁹ *Designing Protest*. BBC Radio 4. London, UK, 14 Apr. 2015. Radio.

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ⁱ Book Bloc was a protest that began in Rome against public-funding cuts and spread globally, reaching London in 2010.