

The Carnival of Popularity

[Paul O’Kane](#)



Shetland Islanders’ Old Norse Kings Festival, 1927, still image courtesy of the British Film Institute [\[1\]](#)

Professional artists and art critics might assume that art has a progressive influence on wider society, but it is difficult to deny that the evaluation of art also plays a significant role in establishing and maintaining class divides. Art’s appreciation tends to separate according to modes of interpretation, levels of sophistication, taste, or tendencies to criticality or complicity. These dividing lines have, however, also long been the target of artists’ and critics’ attention. Claes Oldenburg, in his 1961 POP manifesto *I Am For An Art* enthusiastically embraces the popular while nevertheless viewing it from an avant-garde perspective (recalling that POP was initially referred to as ‘neo-Dada’). He writes:

I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top.
I am for all art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.
... I am for Kool art, 7UP art, Pepsi art, Sunshine art, 39 cents art, 15 cents art, Vatronol art, Dro-bomb art, Vam art, Menthol art, L & M art, Ex-lax art, Venida art, Heaven Hill art, Pamryl art, San-o-med art, Rx art, 9.99 art, Now art, New art, How art, Fire Sale art, Last Chance art, Only art, Diamond art, Tomorrow art, Franks art, Ducks art, Meat-o-rama art. [\[2\]](#)

Here the turmoil of bargain-basement consumerism becomes refreshing material for the professional artist and his informed audience, but it is also a sign of a distinction between two different economies and lifestyles, one of which tends towards uncritical

consumption while the other enjoys a 'behind the scenes' perspective wise to the exploitative nexus of capitalism and media. Ironically, this privilege is not shareable with those who could benefit most from its insights. So, while Oldenburg's rummaging in popular culture turns up signs that can be redeployed strategically in the arena of the professional art world, it leaves us to question whether he is thereby softening or hardening the border between the two.

Artists are, of course, not only interested in POP but also popularity. Jeff Koons, perhaps under a Warholian influence, founded his career on personal fame as much as on works of art that linked Disneyesque Americana to the kind of hyperbolic imagery associated with kitsch craft traditions of toy, ornament, bauble and souvenir making. Warhol himself once claimed (apparently uncritically but surely strategically) that POP is 'liking things', a phrase that clearly resonates with today's click-happy social media generation who, hyper conscious of their own likeability, barely have time to make critically considered responses to their fast moving, largely virtual cultural environment.

Clement Greenberg – whose essay 'The Avant Garde and Kitsch' first appeared in 1939, [\[3\]](#) at about the same time as Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [\[4\]](#) – rather snobbishly derided as 'kitsch' all mass-produced and imitative, poor quality arts designed to exploit and placate the desires of the newly urbanised modern masses. However, he referred inadequately to ways in which modernity had forcibly separated those masses from their own arts, cultures and traditions, and how those traditions were, and continue to be, mimicked, lampooned, appropriated and sold back to the working classes by the more empowered professional classes (and *thus* become kitsch). Benjamin, however, took a little more trouble to imagine how the (then) new media of photography, cinema, illustrated newspapers, gramophone recordings, etc, might provide means by which the working classes could claim or reclaim an art, culture, and maybe even a little dignity and sovereignty of their own, despite being displaced, disempowered and disenfranchised by urbanising and industrialising capitalist modernity and attendant middle-class centrality. Benjamin's optimistic vision might even link a modern marginal figure like Charlie Chaplin's tramp (championed by Benjamin) to a pre-modern carnival tradition (see below) in which a poor man can be king for a day. In his 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' essay, Benjamin also noted how social conflict, and eventual war, inevitably occur whenever capitalism flexes and fails on such a scale that, just when it requires wholesale replacement or adjustment by, for example, eliminating the tense primary distinction between the middle and working classes, it chooses instead to rescue and reinstate itself in its familiar form, shoring up its central players and primary operatives while damning others. This manoeuvre includes throwing the working class the bone of a mere means with which to 'express themselves', perhaps through the spectacular excitement of crude plebiscitary politics and/or dictatorship, complete with uniforms, rallies and simplistic slogans. Benjamin writes:

Fascism attempts to organise the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. [\[5\]](#)

Contentious encounters in art between the professional (as rarified and exceptional) and the popular (as accessible and ubiquitous) thus have a long, rich history and point to an inter-class tension that is constitutive of modernity. Romantic art, executed for and enjoyed by a

privileged class, took an overt interest in the lower classes and their arts and crafts. Thus, a Beethoven symphony might allude to idyllic landscape but could also echo the jigs and reels of country folk or even mark the event of the French Revolution. Wordsworth and Coleridge's groundbreaking *Lyrical Ballads* include poems about the poor, rural, itinerant and disabled. In Goethe, 'ordinary people' also feature significantly, albeit carefully placed around the edges of more ornate, aristocratic lives. Such relationships between 'high' and 'low' culture can, then, be more or less marked by a condescending emulation on the part of those more privileged who might draw into their cultural net a little of the 'charm' of the poor and the rustic. However, in the 1840s Charles Baudelaire encouraged Parisian artists to take a more modern approach, inviting them to embrace the '... pageant of fashionable life and thousands of floating existences ... which drift about in the underworld of a great city'. ^[6] He also pointed to news media as a source for contemporary artists' subject matter. In her 2009 essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image', artist, theorist and educator Hito Steyerl might be said to continue this approach by championing low-res, fast moving, poor quality digital images such as those found on YouTube, Facebook, Ubuweb, etc, as she encourages artists to see these as potentially subversive, progressive vehicles that might extend a legacy connecting Baudelaire's realism to DADA's anti-fascist collage, and POP. Steyerl writes:

On the one hand, the economy of poor images, with its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution and its ethics of remix and appropriation, enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before. ... While it enables the users' active participation in the creation and distribution of content, it also drafts them into production. Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-) authors of poor images.... Poor images are thus popular images – images that can be made and seen by the many. They express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd: its opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission. ... The condition of the images speaks not only of countless transfers and reformattings, but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, reedit, or upload them. ^[7]

In sources as apparently diverse as Steyerl and Baudelaire then, we can find appeals to professional artists to recognise, embrace and contend not just with popular imagery and popular culture but also with popularity, as ways of maintaining art's and the artists' relevance to dramatically changing times.

In the 1990s, Greil Marcus's book *Lipstick Traces* provided an intellectual history of 1970s Punk culture allied to French 1950s and '60s Situationism. Marcus thereby contributed a rare and effective example of how relatively esoteric European art theories and practices can be successfully translated into disruptive, progressive popular art and action. Around the same time, the critic and theorist Dave Hickey published a collection of innovative and slightly notorious essays titled *Air Guitar*. This book involves a provocative criticism of what Hickey perceived as an inappropriately narrow and over-academicised strain of art writing. It demonstrates a passionate concern for working class culture, replete with custom cars, neon lights, popular music and far from politically correct language. Hickey writes in his preface:

... I have never taken anything printed in a book to heart that was not somehow confirmed in my ordinary experience – and that did not, to some extent, reform and redeem that experience. Nor have I had any experience of high art that was

not somehow confirmed in my experience of ordinary culture, and that did not, to some extent, reform and redeem that. So I have tried to reinstate the connective tissues here, and, in the process, have written an odd sort of memoir ...^[8]

He ends his preface claiming that his writings are ‘love songs for people who live in a democracy’,^[9] thus subtly building bridges between fine art, sentiment, sentimentality, popular culture and politics.

Mikhail Bakhtin, working in the reputedly stifling political and cultural climate of the Soviet Union, suggested an alternative system of political representation, class equality and distributed power, conveniently summarised in his affirmation of ‘The Carnival and the Carnavalesque’ (the name he gave to a short essay).^[10] According to Bakhtin, in pre-modern times (roughly the medieval to the Renaissance period), the majority of the labouring classes annually, and for several days, weeks and even months (particularly following the harvest when seasonal work was complete and an atmosphere of plenty and rest prevailed), played out liberation from the established order and performed their own exceptions to it. In carnivalesque parades and games the usual hierarchy of ruler and ruled, sense and nonsense, common and rare, father and son, fool and king, civility and barbarism, valued and disdained, even faeces and gold, were temporarily suspended, disrupted, exchanged or inverted. Given the context in which Bakhtin wrote (the Soviet Union of the 1950s) he may have been surreptitiously and subtly, although no less provocatively, appealing to different ways and means of acknowledging the revolutionary modern grail of ‘equality’ held up as central to both the aims of the French (bourgeois) Revolution and the Russian (communist) Revolution. Bakhtin’s pre-modern carnivalesque ‘equality’ is, however, not clumsily imposed and granted from above by a well-meaning but unwieldy modern state; rather, it provides a model wherein every difference, just like every dog or saint, might have its day. Indeed, carnival and the carnivalesque provide a model wherein difference itself has its day.

While writing this article, my attention was distracted by one example of the rapidly shared, poor quality, online video clips referred to by Hito Steyerl above. It is a promotion for an archival facility serving the history of cinema and features a 1927 documentation of a carnival in the Shetland Isles, a northerly and remote part of Britain. The clip (see [here](#), or [here](#)) shows crowds of ‘ordinary people’ (inhabitants of rural villages and fishing communities) outrageously but also painstakingly and imaginatively costumed, parading and performing ‘extra-ordinary’ staged scenarios. NB: if I repeatedly write ‘ordinary people’ here, even within inverted commas, I may appear to be continuing to expose the way in which art and its evaluation creates or constitutes borders between cultures – and yet, the reason this particular video clip is of interest is precisely because it seems to show close *similarities* between what those in the film are doing and what some contemporary professional artists may be trying to do (see below). Bakhtin mapped historically how the carnival and carnivalesque eventually dwindled in cultural importance around the time of the Renaissance (which he marks as the beginning of modernity), but he also suggested that carnival and the carnivalesque persists, irrepressibly, in pockets of cultural activity into and through the modern period. Thus we might continue to locate and identify it today, perhaps seeing the historical legacy of Bakhtin’s ‘carnavalesque’ played out in contemporary art. Examples are surely legion, but here are just a few: in Anthea Hamilton’s recent performance installation [The Squash](#) at Tate Britain,^[11] revered and respected modern art works were repositioned and recontextualised by the artist and then subjected to the masked, costumed activities of a performer in a disruptive, discomfiting and occasionally charming dialogue

between artist, audience, art and context. Meanwhile, Monster Chetwynd's [\[12\]](#) 2012 Turner Prize installation involved performers who brought the carnivalesque inside the established and hallowed space of the prestigious institution as if to reclaim it as a popular space, or perhaps to reveal, by contrast, just how *unlike* a public space the Tate's version of a white cube space really is. [\[13\]](#) An installation by Haegue Yang at the South London Gallery in 2019 was not content to just occupy walls and floors according to the traditions of painting and sculpture, but was daily cajoled into a more public life by curatorial assistants who moved the artist's ornate sculptural objects around the space as if in a procession. [\[14\]](#)

These artists and their works might remind us that carnival is an event wherein the overarching logic of any instated regime is revealed as bearable and sustainable only if it is mutable, regularly or continuously (even if symbolically) dissipated, relinquished and redistributed. Similarly, today, those who enjoy the benefits of our modern democracy cannot be complacent about nor assume anything permanent regarding our democracy. Recent events clearly reveal that we are involved in an increasingly difficult battle (or 'constant combat' according to Gilles Deleuze) [\[15\]](#) not just to rescue and defend democracy but to update, improve and extend it, and this means including and sharing that democracy with more, new, different and 'other' people who may not yet have been able to enjoy its benefits, and who can in turn contribute to it by bringing their own ideas, cultures, values and needs, to explore, expand and test its potential. While we might picture modern democracy as having emerged *from* revolution, its inherent and constitutive tension, turmoil and debate also show that democracy *is* the revolution, officially instated perhaps but still constantly fought over and transformed. We can relate this to Deleuze's definition of the Left as a force that is never in power but always and only ever marginal, virtual and imminent [\[16\]](#) – ie always debating and creating the next group of rights that will prepare and allow the *next* communities, the *next* 'others' to enter, enjoy and extend democracy.

In 1968, worldwide revolutionary actions, although brimming with hopes of youthful renewal, famously foundered on the limits of possible collaboration between the middle and working class, represented by students and factory workers. Meanwhile, attempts to lead modern revolution beyond its bourgeois stage on to a supposedly more inclusive and democratic age of the rule of the proletariat have mainly been demonstrated as failed or crushed attempts – as in, for example, China and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the discrediting of such political leviathans may have led us on to strive for more ambitious goals, and so today, rather than advocating the ascendancy of a single, oppressed class who are difficult to identify or define (other than to say they have been routinely abused and exploited as an intrinsic aspect of the structure of capitalism) we seem to be expanding the notion of modern revolutionary rights and democracy in the direction of a 'rule of difference', even entering the epoch of the reign of a quasi-Bacchanalian play that involves a more festive and holistic appreciation of everything as other to everything else and everyone as other to everyone else.

The current state of modern revolution, embodied in the form of a dynamic democracy, is a society that proudly revels in its potential for liberal inclusivity, diversity and tolerance but which rarely acknowledges the rule over – or at the centre of – that democracy by 'a' or 'the' middle class (if not as a definable object then at least as a symbol or aspiration). In 2017, President Macron of France spoke directly and confidently to the ascendant populists in Washington DC, reminding them that the 'middle classes remain the backbone of our democracies'. [\[17\]](#) However, it is not only President Trump and his accomplices who might disagree with this assertion, but also a figure on the radical Left of French thought and

politics: Jacques Rancière. Rancière's disruptive thinking couldn't be more distant from the stabilising anatomical image conjured by Macron. Rancière proclaims 'we do not aspire to equality, we *start from* equality' (my italics), ^[18] and this short statement might contain the potential to expose the fact that class divisions, emerging from the French Revolution, remain intrinsic to modern society, and furthermore that a complacent and condescending conceit is habitually concealed within the commonly assumed benign and noble aspiration to (eventually, possibly, gradually, affordably) placate and liberate the working class (and perhaps all other 'others') according to parsimonious promises of, for example, a 'minimum', 'standard' or 'living' wage. Meanwhile the professional classes, regarded as justifiably 'central' ('the backbone'), enjoy making real money ('disposable income') while acquiring and inheriting property, cultivating 'work-life' or 'work-leisure balance', accumulating adequate pensions and racking up numerous other socio-economic advantages that cannot be rationally justified as fair or equal in a modern sense, except according to a self-legitimising logic (just as big business tends to inspect its own books, award its own bonuses and in ethical respects metaphorically 'mark its own homework'). Rancière's brief statement thereby exposes a huge and hegemonic imbalance at the heart of our modern capitalist democracy, one that stimulates a justified sense of marginalisation and indignation on the part of the working class.

In what are perhaps his most eccentrically radical studies, *Proletarian Nights* and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*,^[19] Rancière also takes pains to stress that the supposedly 'uneducated' classes (defined by their relative education as well as their relative wealth) are nevertheless replete with their own cultures, capabilities, resources, histories, knowledges, languages, values, judgements, esoterica and sophistications – ie with their own (and 'different') means of political, cultural, philosophical and aesthetic representation. Although crucially, Rancière seems to imply, these can only be revealed once a presumptuously superior and judgmental gaze that imposes cultural restraint and hierarchisation (albeit oblivious to its hegemonic omnipresence) is *removed* from perceptions of working-class activity, a removal that might also annul perception of 'them' as other.

The middle classes who emerged from modern revolution 'owning' its democracy and occupying its 'centre ground' have, meanwhile, maintained and developed ample means of representing their own territory and themselves, including the entire apparatus that is habitually referred to as 'art', 'fine art' or 'the art world': a huge, complex, publicly and privately supported network of organs offering a kaleidoscopic range of views and visions, both of its treasured artefacts and of itself. However, despite post-revolutionary modern rhetoric informed by terms like 'fraternity', 'inclusivity', and more recently 'transparency', our democracy remains dangerously and insidiously divided by what has been rightly referred to as a 'class ceiling', although 'two-way mirror' may be a better analogy given that the working classes, while pruriently observed as others in numerous soap operas, reality TV shows, etc, are disadvantaged by being denied their own equivalent system by which to return the gaze and critically watch those who watch them. It may, then, also be the case that the working classes are denied any equal and adequate means of representing themselves with any nuance, ie other than *as* a mass or an entire class. The scenarios described by Greenberg and Benjamin, and the diminution of carnival in modernity bemoaned by Bakhtin, all seem to point to a steady depletion of modern working class cultural representation that might prove just as painful and troublesome to the ideal of a peaceful, diverse, fair and shared democracy as does any purely financial or material inequality.

The example provided by the Shetland Islanders in 1927, dressed as cartoonish animals and parading and performing in truly bizarre fashion, seems however to show or suggest 'ordinary people' deploying the class-crossing form of the carnival and carnivalesque while taking care and pains (and perhaps even 'taking back') cultural and political representation by means of carefully created objects, images and events. 'They' thereby appear to demonstrate a form of non-professional art that can be proudly claimed as their own, and by parading and performing in this playful way a serious political representation is also made. Politics and culture, the aesthetic and the political, are fused within the carnivalesque, which bridges perceived distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture, working and middle classes, rich and poor, coarse and fine, younger and older generations, the popular and the esoteric (in this way the special inclusivity of carnival also provides a promising model of the holistic).

In our current moment of political, cultural and inter-class crisis, when the ever-pragmatic 'central' and relatively empowered middle classes might feel justifiably eager to hide within the esoteric realm of a cultural silo, or be tempted to turn away from the plight, anger and anxiety of a newly volatilised and correspondingly demonised working class, the carnivalesque, with its promised 'reign of difference' may provide a model by means of which our shared society might progress more broadly and holistically. Taking this pre-modern form as our example, we might find ways to deal with (rather than defer or deny) the significant imbalance hard-wired into the democratic settlement of the modern revolution. The carnivalesque, in its potential to pool and exchange relative, different and respective arts, crafts, beliefs, aims, knowledges and economies, might provide the relatively delimited realm of professional 'fine' art with an acceptable form, not only of the popular but perhaps even of populism. Populism, a concept of which we are currently and justifiably afraid, and with which we are appalled, may yet be a cultural phenomenon that needs to be confronted, sampled, digested, understood and somehow eventually integrated as our progressive modern democracy morphs uncomfortably into its next, more complex but hopefully fairer form. By following *this* parade, the bizarre march of the carnival and the carnivalesque, the popular might just be wrested from populism and the notion of populism possibly *detoured*.

[1] Taken from archival movie footage found at <https://tinyurl.com/yb854etk> (1'40"); a shorter version can also be seen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qo1k306BLZA> (1'6"), both accessed 9 September 2019

[2] Claes Oldenburg, 'I Am For An Art', in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds, second edition, Blackwell, Oxford, 2003, pp 743–747

[3] Clement Greenberg, 'The Avant-Garde and Kitsch', in *ibid*, pp 539–549

[4] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp 217–252

[5] *Ibid*, p 241

[6] Charles Baudelaire, 'On The Heroism of Modern Life', in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, Penguin Books, London, 1972, pp 104–107

[7] Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', in *The Wretched of the Screen*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2012, pp 31–45

[8] Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar*, Art Issues, Los Angeles, California, 1997, p 10

[9] Ibid, p 17

[10] See Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Carnival and Carnavalesque', in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, John Storey, ed, second edition, Pearson Prentice Hall, Harlow, 1998, pp 250–260

[11] The Duveen Galleries, Tate Britain, London, 2 March – 7 October 2018

[12] The artist, who has changed her name several times during her career (itself perhaps a 'carnavalesque' procedure), was known as 'Spartacus Chetwynd' at that time

[13] <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/turner-prize-2012/turner-prize-2012-artists-spartacus-chetwynd> (accessed 8 September 2019)

[14] ['Haegue Yang: Tracing Movement', South London Gallery, 8 March – 26 May 2019](#)

[15] See 'To Have Done With Judgment', in Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Verso, London, 1998, pp 126–135

[16] See <http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/ABC2.html> accessed 9 September 2019

[17] 'I believe facing inequalities should push us to improve policy coordination within the G20 to reduce financial speculation, and create mechanisms to protect the middle class's interest, because our middle classes are the backbone of our democracies.' <https://www.voltairenet.org/article200927.html>, accessed 7 September 2019

[18] A good discussion of this point can be found in *Jacques Rancière – Key Concepts*, Jean-Philippe Deranty, ed, Acumen, Durham, UK, 2010 pp 72 – 77, or also p 144 where we find the statement: '... the axiom of equality is the necessary presupposition of modern politics'. See also Andrew Schaap's paper 'Enacting the right to have rights: Jacques Rancière's critique of Hannah Arendt' where he states: '... what gives rise to politics is the assumption of an equality of anyone with anyone', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol 10 no 1, 2011, pp 22–45 (quote taken from p 35). Finally, see: '... equality is not a goal to be reached. It is not a common level, an equivalent amount of riches or an identity of living conditions that must be reached as the consequence of historic evolution and strategic action. Instead it is a point of departure', from Jules Gavroche, 'Jacques Rancière: Reflections on equality and emancipation', [Autonomies](#) website, posted 5 August 2017, accessed 19 September 2019.

[19] Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, Verso Books, London, 2012; and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1991

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