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The Carnival of Popularity

Part II: Towards a 'mask-ocracy'

Paul O'Kane



A protester uses a cut paper bag as a mask in a march in Hong Kong, Sunday, 6 October 2019. A group of pro-democracy Hong Kong legislators filed a legal challenge against the government's use of a colonial-era emergency law to criminalise the wearing of masks at rallies to quell anti-government demonstrations, which diminished in intensity but didn't stop. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung, courtesy of Associated Press) <https://www.businessinsider.com/thousands-protest-as-bid-to-block-hong-kong-mask-ban-fails-2019-10?r=US&IR=T>

This is Part II of an article titled 'The Carnival of Popularity' that was published in *Third Text Online* in September 2019.¹ The original essay grew up around a single stimulus, a 1.5-minute film clip, from 1927, found on social media, showing a pageant or carnival conducted by Shetland Islanders in a poor, rural community in the far north of the British Isles. Here is the link once again: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1943763908999092>. On reflection, what made me write about, around and in response to this clip was the hunch or intuition that here might lie some clue, maybe even some possible solution to one of the biggest cultural and political problems facing us today, ie the erosion of a once progressive and optimistic, post-World War II ideal of an increasingly mobile, multicultural and international society, and the threatened collapse of that ideal into increasingly divisive and defensive societies. This direction implies the corruption and diversion of democracy's promissory trajectory by the rising forces of populism and resurgent nationalism.

¹ 'The Carnival of Popularity, Part II' is an edited version of a paper given by the author to the 52nd International AICA Congress in Germany, in Cologne and Berlin, 1–7 October 2019. The Congress's theme was 'Art Criticism in Times of Populism and Nationalism'. The paper, 'The Carnival of Popularity: Wrestling the Popular from Populism' was delivered on 4 October in the Berlinische Galerie, Alte Jakobstraße 124–128, Berlin, as part of 'The Public and the Popular' panel hosted by Alexander Koch. Part I of this essay, and initial thoughts on the 'Carnival of Popularity', was published in *Third Text Online* in September 2019 and can be found at <http://www.thirdtext.org/OKane-carnival>

Thinking along these lines, it struck me that we might need to wrest or rescue popularity, pop and the popular (in all of which artists have a stake) from populism. To do so, we might first try to distinguish the popular from populism. It could perhaps be claimed, with some confidence, that democracy *is* popularity, with the rule of the people *by* the people (the populace) at society's heart. As artists, meanwhile, we have something to say about popularity, as we variously, avidly, and artfully, either cultivate popularity or treat it with a kind of *avant-garde* disdain while surreptitiously and simultaneously courting it, perhaps even becoming popular by making *unpopular* art.

Populism however is *not* democracy, we are quite sure of that. It reeks too much of fascism – the enemy, the nadir, the flip-side or antithesis of democracy. And yet, both populism and fascism (are they the same thing, is one a prelude to the other?) can clearly *exploit* popularity, as the German National Socialists did when organising the 'Degenerate Art' and 'Great German Art' exhibitions in the late 1930s. Those exhibitions remain, I believe, the most 'popular' art exhibitions in the entire history of art exhibitions. However, we also know that Nazism's 'popularity', and thus the apparent 'success' of those exhibitions, was achieved by cultivating collective fear and hatred and by suspending and overriding democracy.

Given the recent development of these ideas, it now seems crucial to me that in the video clip of the Shetlands parade everyone is masked, costumed, or both, and thus in some way acting as other than their usual, 'real' or authentic self. Soldiers signed up to serve a nationalist ideology also dress up in uniforms and in this way set aside or repress aspects of 'authentic' personal identity. But one promising aspect of the Shetlanders' parade is that, despite evoking and mimicking the militaristic attributes of a uniformed march, their perambulation is always parodic, hyperbolic, fanciful and playful, never threatening or violent. This might then suggest an extended, amplified or fanciful version of democracy, in which it is no longer 'the people' who rule but their masks, their costumes, their play. We might even be tempted to champion a '*mask-ocracy*' in which costume, art, play, mischief, difference and *mis*-rule rule – at least for a time, a weekend, a week or a season. Meanwhile, any allegiance demonstrated here is neither to personal authenticity nor to national identity, but is, rather, an allegiance to fun, art, play and carnival itself.

By means of a greater acceptance of the fluidity, uncertainty and unknowability of identity (both personal and collective), and by detaching identity from any devotion or aspiration to authenticity, we might thus begin to glean, regain or reclaim a more promissory and progressive alternative to a society in which currently, and it seems increasingly, we are all too willing to identify ourselves (and 'themselves') in immutable terms, ie as one thing and not another, as one nationality, race, gender, colour, sexuality, class, age, etc, and not another, while correspondingly identifying others all too rapidly as *immutably* other.

Today, when we talk about populism, fearing that it is a twenty-first century version of or *entrée* to fascism, the 'we' in this sentence tends, I suspect, to be a middle-class perspective (the perspective of a 'we' who accept that 'we' could justifiably be described as such). Meanwhile the populists that this 'we' fears, tend to be either working class or maverick members of the middle and upper classes who are in some way manipulating, pandering to and reliant upon groups of working-class supporters to acquire power and influence. Thus, hopes of a peaceful conciliation of a middle class/working class divide, a divide that has lingered in our democracies since the

eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century revolutions began to promise a more equal, fair and just modern world, seem more distant and less attainable today than ever – and this despite the efforts of the noble arts to reach out across the class divide, to open their doors, provide opportunities, educate, include, regionalise and pluralise, etc.

However, it should not be forgotten that, as I stated in the opening sentence of ‘The Carnival of Popularity’ (Part I) on this theme:

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.

The image of the Shetland Islanders’ pageant continues to interest me because it does *not* represent a potentially patronising image of a relatively privileged but possibly misguided middle class sharing the relative abundance of its cultural capital with those less fortunate than itself. Rather, the Shetlanders’ pageant seems to show a long established, classless tradition that does not appear to be institutionalised, other than on its own traditional terms.

Furthermore, just as it obscures or obfuscates class divides, this masked and costumed pageant, parade or carnival eradicates the division between art and life (Mikhail Bakhtin notably called carnival a ‘theatre without footlights’)² and provides an example of a kind of art that can reside at the heart of a community. However, this requires a community that still *has* a heart, and this clip, this parade, perhaps shows a community that is yet to ‘have the heart ripped out of it’ by the voracious 1980s, ’90s and noughties’ globalisation and financialisation of local, vernacular, traditional and national economies – a cultural catastrophe that, we now see, can become the breeding ground of populism, xenophobia, racism and downright fascism.

Returning to the political and cultural cataclysm that many say (or, at least ‘we’ say) is facing our societies and nations today under the sign of populism, it could be said that, given the models and examples above, one way forward for the aforementioned ‘we’ (ie the relatively privileged and self-assured middle classes, whose art and culture has resided, structurally and formally at the heart of its very own ‘modernity’ for over two hundred years now) might be to look out for possibly uncomfortable ways to cede, relinquish and exchange power, territory and status with, and to, other cultures – but always ethically and holistically including, if and however possible, *all* other cultures, *including* (given the ethical model of holistic aspiration, as *per* the universal declaration of human rights) those ‘we’ might *least* relish embracing and those we fear as enemies of our most cherished principles. How could that be possible? Perhaps the carnival, with its masks and costumes, play and games might offer us a model or context to think this unthinkable thought.

Only a truly *holistic* politics, culture and philosophy will ever satisfy our commonly expounded aspirations to universal peace, equality and justice. However, from where does this universal vision, this progressive aspiration arise? Perhaps in the ancient tradition of carnival itself (something that historically unfolds back at least as far as the revelry of the ancient Greeks’ Dionysian cult). And, given the seeming intractability of our differences and our failure thus far to realise a society in which those differences can truly interrelate, how will it ever be delivered?

² 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

Again, perhaps only through and *as* carnival. Here, we might start to notice that carnival is more ancient, innate, formative and essential than we had previously considered it to be. As a phenomenon that has always lain at or near the heart of society, and therefore as something constitutive of society, it might be capable of acting as a form of solvent upon any fixed and therefore fractious manifestation of society.

In its emphatic evocation of a wholesale relativism, carnival suggests – in temporary, symbolic form at least – the possibility of a just, fair and happy society in which all (albeit costumed, masked and relieved of roles and identities) encounter and embrace all. The promissory progress that ‘we’ are most proud of, and that ‘we’ most prize, is something ‘we’ necessarily and always, inevitably and inexorably strive for. It leads us in the direction of greater and greater rights and freedoms and ultimately to a *holistic* outcome in which *all* difference is *always* represented, always in-play and at play – so long as it is represented in a way that is so mitigated, mediated, costumed and masked that it is never harmful but always primarily playful.

To aspire to this holistic relativist vision, our ‘we’ (as suggested above) needs to cede, relinquish and exchange with others, but not in any patronising, condescending, ‘door-opening’ manner but in some more substantial, reciprocal demonstration of our ultimately equal status, as human beings who do, and must, all have the same basic rights, rights which are perhaps the greatest progressive achievement of all of modernity’s achievements. Such an exchange might involve acknowledgement of the shortcomings of those temporary settlements with which, and by means of which, the formative modern revolutions of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (themselves embodiments of carnival, it might be suggested) were concluded. Those great revolutions, like most wars, ended or resolved themselves by establishing crude borders drawn between peoples, including class, economic and cultural borders that are every bit as unsatisfactory as physical, land and geographic borders, and which seem bound to produce further, subsequent anguish and conflict, until the day when – again, given a holistic ideal – *all* borders are erased.

The legacies of modernity’s revolutions smoulder on, their shortcomings and outstanding grievances inadequately assuaged by progressive political representation, their embers easily fanned into flames by today’s populists. Those revolutions continue in stuttering, spluttering, newly complex forms, evidenced here by the hi-visibility ‘*gilets jaunes*’ in France, there by claims for new rafts of rights (even rights for flora and for fauna), and further evidenced by socio-political turmoil wherever it might be in the world.

Circling back one last time to the image of the Shetland islanders’ parade, it could be assumed that what is depicted there is *not* a modern phenomenon but rather a pre-modern, ancient tradition, albeit annually rejuvenated and updated. This example might, in turn, suggest that possible solutions to today’s stark and increasing class and cultural divisions may lie in the as yet under explored archives of the early modern and pre-modern past. In those archives myriad ideas and images, capable of making unexpected, untimely, incongruous and anachronistic suggestions, have decades or centuries to marinade unseen, and thereby develop their special ability to surprise, inspire and expand our sense of the possibilities available to us today.

As discussed in the first part of ‘The Carnival of Popularity’, Mikhail Bakhtin seemed to think as much when, writing in the Cold War climate of a nervous and stultifying Soviet Union, he implicitly embraced and advocated the ancient model of carnival as a pre-modern alternative to

achieving equality and of alleviating *inequality*, or at least providing a kind of pressure valve by means of which to make an apparently intrinsic and inevitable *inequality* more tolerable and endurable. In so doing, Bakhtin inadvertently, yet presciently and precociously suggested a future society in which the modern division between work and play might become a ‘thing of the past’ along with those divisions between the modern classes founded upon and maintained precisely by work – by the nature of work, the price of work, the rewards of work, the value of work. Today this idea could be connected to the fact that rumours are increasingly heard of a pending ‘universal basic income’ and a ‘post-work society’.

The traditional carnival, as documented and historicised by Bakhtin, marked the end of the season of hard work. Today, communities that once found pride, identity and meaning through the annual or seasonal oscillations of work and play may well have lost that pride, identity and meaning, as nineteenth and twentieth century capitalism morphed into late twentieth and early twenty-first century globalisation and financialisation. And populists today are ‘making hay’ with the opportunity to capitalise on the resentments of the disenfranchised, but a promised and predicted ‘post-work’ future might yet allow us to place, or re-place, carnival, the mask, and the carnivalesque at the centre of our societies, where it may no longer – as in work societies – be treated as something rare, gifted, reserved for and allowed by our superiors only on special days.

In the clip of the 1927 Shetland Islanders parading and performing in their masks and costumes, we might therefore see, *not* the past but a vision of a possible future where and when art and politics, art and life, the working and middle classes are subsumed by and into a more playful and collective life and art, a way of pursuing art, culture, life and politics in which entrenched, ‘true’ and authentic identities, territories, loyalties and allegiances could give way to masks, costumes, play and ‘plays’ of various, almost infinite kinds.

The pageant, carnival, gala or parade are, of course, also serious, and, importantly, it is through the *art* necessary to their production – ie the extent and quality of evident care, imagination, preparation, conceptualisation and craft – that they alert us to the fact that carnival is just as serious as it is comedic. And here lies, perhaps, the key to the particular fascination of this 1920s image. Carnival reminds us of the power of contradictions and ambiguities that, in turn, are able to expose and challenge the reasoning, platitudes and syllogisms on which any current manifestation of society is constructed as mutable, if not risible.

Carnival thereby reminds, and has always reminded, that society does not have to be the way that it currently is; ‘another world is possible’, is *always* possible, and is always immediately within reach. It simply requires carnival and the carnivalesque to expose, to reveal and to remind us of the alternatives available at each and any particular moment. Carnival, an ever-present resource or facility, promises to rescue us from taking any singular or simple side and thus merely consolidating conflict and division.

Carnival and the carnivalesque also offer hope of wresting popularity from populism by means of the model it provides of something that both precedes democracy and that might supersede and supplant democracy – perhaps as what I have here called ‘mask-ocracy’ (the rule of the mask *by* the mask, *for* the mask). Such a shift in our political aims and forms might just slip our democracy out of the populist’s grip and awaken ‘the people’ from the populist’s spell, opening every eye to the fact that a workless, leaderless, borderless future society might be both accessible and desirable by way of and by means of each others’ innate capacity for play.

Carnavalesque aspects and attributes of protests all around the world today – perhaps exemplified by recent events in Hong Kong, or the ant-fascist, anti-populist ‘Sardines’ movement in Italy – seem to provide increasing encouragement and support for ‘mask-ocracy’ as an apparently playful, but also utterly serious speculation.



Protesters carrying ‘Sardines’ figurines and banners join the first national rally organised by the Sardine Movement in Piazza San Giovanni in Roma on 14 December 2019 (Alessandra Benedetti/Corbis via Getty Images)
<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/25/799327929/regional-elections-in-italy-can-the-sardines-win-against-populism?t=1580553207145>
accessed 01/02/2020

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