

The Carnival of Popularity: Wrestling the Popular from Populism***Paul O'Kane***

Paul O'Kane is a critic, musician, and author. In both his practice and his lectures, he connects criticism and popular culture; in doing so, he stands for a perspective that knows and reflects class struggles and seeks a dissenting voice, with which the power of the popular opposes the calls to power of populism. O'Kane presents the carnival – or, more methodologically speaking – the carnivalesque as a historical form of cultural production ›from below‹ and asks about the possibilities of transferring carnivalesque practices into today's culture and class struggles. In addition to cultural-historical examples, concepts by thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Rancière and Walter Benjamin are also brought into focus. Finally, the question arises as to whether carnivalesque strategies are also suitable for an art-critical practice, and whether they are advisable to position the popular against the populist.



Fig. 7: Old Norse Vikings Festival, Shetland Islands, *BFI* Filmstills, 1927

Paul O'Kane

What do I mean by the title, *The Carnival of Popularity*? And how exactly does it fit with the theme of our congress? *The Carnival of Popularity* grew up around a single initial stimulus. It was 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.¹ What made me write about, around and in response to this clip was a certain 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, i.e. the erosion of a once progressive and optimistic, post WW2 model or ideal, of an increasingly mobile, multicultural and international society, the threatened collapse of that ideal into today's increasingly divided societies. I'm talking about the corruption and diversion of democracy's promissory trajectory by the rising forces of populism. I'm talking about trying to rescue that trajectory.

Thinking along these lines it seemed to me that we might need to wrest or rescue popularity, pop, and the popular (in all of which artists have a stake) from populism, and so we might first try to distinguish the popular from populism.

We could perhaps claim, with some confidence, that democracy is popularity, with the rule of the people, *by* the people – the populace – at society's heart. Artists meanwhile surely have something to say about popularity, as they/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 reminds us 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?) clearly *exploit* popularity, as did the German National Socialists when organising the *Degenerate Art*, and *Great German Art* exhibitions in the late 1930s, which remain, I believe, the most ›popular‹ art exhibitions in the entire history of art exhibitions. However, we also know 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.

In the video clip of the Shetlands parade, it is crucial that everyone is masked, costumed, or both, and is 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 uniform, and in this way surely set-aside or repress some aspects of personal identity. But one promising aspect of the ›Shetlands‹ parade is that, despite evoking and mimicking the militaristic attributes of a uniformed march, it 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.

1 See: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1943763908999092>

It is a *mask-ocracy* in which costume, art, play, mischief, difference and *misrule* rule – at least for a day. Any allegiance demonstrated here, is neither to personal authenticity nor to national identity. Any allegiance in this parade is rather an allegiance to fun, art, play, and carnival.

Through 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 begin to glean, regain or reclaim a more promissory and progressive alternative to the society in which currently, and, it seems, increasingly, ›we‹ or ›people‹ seem all-too willing to identify ourselves, or themselves, in immutable terms, i.e. as one thing and not another, as one nationality, race, gender, colour, sexuality, class, age etc. and not another (that way lies war), while, correspondingly identifying others all-too rapidly as immutably other.

Today, when we talk about populism, fearing that it is a 21st century version of, or *entrée* to fascism, the ›we‹ in this sentence tends – I suspect – to be a middle-class perspective (the perspective of people, ›we‹, who would accept that they, or ›we‹ could justifiably be described as such). Meanwhile the populists that this ›we‹ fears, tend to be, either themselves working class, or maverick members of higher classes who are in some way manipulating, pandering to, and reliant upon groups of working-class supporters, to achieve greater positions of power and influence.

Thus, hopes of a peaceful conciliation, of a middle-class / working class divide, a divide that has lingered in our democracies ever since 18th, 19th and 20th century revolutions began to promise a more equal, fair and just modern world, may today seem further away, less attainable 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, pluralise etc.

However, it shouldn't be forgotten that, as I state at the very start of a previously published version or chapter of this enquiry:

»...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 interests 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 particular brand of ›cultural capital‹ with those less fortunate than itself. Rather, the Shetlanders' pageant seems to show a long established, we might say ›classless‹ tradition, and one that does not appear institutionalised, other than on its own traditional terms.

Just as it obscures or obfuscates class divides, this masked and costumed pageant, parade or carnival also eradicates the division between art and life (Bakhtin called carnival a ›theatre without footlights‹) and provides an example of a kind of art that resides at the heart of a community.

This of course requires a community that still *has* a heart, and in this clip, in this parade, we see a community that is perhaps 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.

If we return to the political and cultural disaster that many say (and that ›we‹ say) is facing our societies and nations today under the sign of Populism, what ›we‹ or I, might be trying to say here is that, given the models and examples above, we might begin to see that one way forward for the aforementioned ›we‹ – i.e. 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 200 years now – might be to look for ways, possibly uncomfortable, to begin 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, i.e. including (given the ethical model of a holistic aspiration, as per the universal declaration of human rights), including those we *least* relish embracing.

Only a truly *holistic* politics, culture and philosophy will ever satisfy our commonly expounded aspirations to universal peace, equality and justice.

But from where does this universal vision, this progressive aspiration arise? Perhaps in the ancient tradition of carnival itself. And how will it ever be delivered? Again, perhaps only through and *as* carnival.

In its evocation of a wholesale relativism, carnival implies or suggests, in temporary, symbolic form at least, the *possibility* of a fair, just, and happy society in which all – albeit costumed and masked – encounter and embrace all.

To aspire to this holistic relativist vision, our ›we‹ needs to cede, relinquish and exchange, not in a patronising, ›door-opening and sharing‹ 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 our modernity's achievements.

This might also involve a demonstrative acknowledgement of the shortcomings of the temporary settlements with which, and by means of which, the formative modern revolutions (themselves perhaps embodiments of carnival) of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, concluded. Those great revolutions, like so many 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 all of which seem bound to produce further, subsequent anguish and conflict until the day when – again, given a holistic ideal – those borders are finally erased.

Today, those modern revolutions and their legacies smolder on, their flames easily fanned by populists, their grievances inadequately assuaged by progressive political representation. We see them carry on, in stuttering, spluttering, newly complex and confused forms, evidenced by the hi-visibility ›*gilets jaunes*‹ in France, but also by *all* the socio-political turmoil currently coming from Left, Right and Center almost wherever we look in the world.

If we begin to conclude now by returning to the image of the Shetlands parade, we have to assume that what is depicted there is *not* a modern phenomenon but rather a pre-modern, possibly ancient tradition. This might, in turn, suggest that possible solutions to

today's increasingly stark class and cultural divisions may lie in the as-yet under-explored archives of the early modern and pre-modern past. There, myriad ideas and images, capable of making unexpected suggestions, have had decades, or centuries, to marinate unseen, and thereby develop their special ability to surprise and inspire possibility today.

Mikhail Bakhtin seemed to think as much when, writing in the Cold War climate of a nervous and stultifying Soviet Union, he may have implicitly embraced and promoted the model of carnival as a pre-modern alternative to achieving equality, alleviating *inequality*, or at least providing a pressure valve by means of which to make an apparently intrinsic and inevitable *inequality* more tolerable and endurable.

In doing so, he inadvertently, yet presciently and precociously, suggested a future society in which the division between work and play might itself become a ›thing of the past‹, along with those divisions between the modern classes founded upon, and maintained precisely by work – the nature of work, the price of work, the rewards of work, the value of work.

And today we already hear increasingly about a ›basic minimum wage‹ and a ›post-work society‹.

If we look, one last time, at the clip of the 1927 Shetland Islanders parading and performing in their masks and costumes, we might then see there, *not* the past, but some 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, loyalties and allegiances give way to masks, costumes, play and ›plays‹ of various kinds.

But the playful pageant, carnival, gala or parade are clearly also important and serious, and it is their art – the extent and quality of evident care, imagination, preparation, conceptualisation and craft – that alerts us to the fact that all of this is just as serious as it is comical.

And here lies, perhaps the key to the particular fascination of this particular image.

Carnival reminds us, and has always reminded us, that society does not have to be the way that it currently is. i.e. ›another world is always possible‹.

It also reminds us of contradictions and ambiguities that have the ability to expose the reasoning, platitudes, and syllogisms on which current society is constructed, as both mutable and risible. Carnival always promises to rescue us from taking a single and simple side and in doing so crudely consolidating conflict and division.

And so it may be that carnival and the carnivalesque offer us hope of wresting popularity from populism, perhaps by augmenting or supplanting democracy with what we have here called a ›maskocracy‹ (the rule of the mask, *by* the mask) that slips ›the people‹ and democracy out of the populist's grip and awakens ›the people‹ from the populist's spell.

The traditional carnival, 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, lost that pride, identity and meaning as 19th and 20th century capitalism morphed into late 20th and early

21st century globalisation and financialisation. Populists are ›making hay‹ with this opportunity to capitalise on the resentments of the disenfranchised. But perhaps our promised ›post-work‹ futures will finally allow us to place, or re-place carnival and the carnivalesque at the center of our societies, and no-longer, as in work societies, treated as something rare, exceptional, reserved for special days.

After all, isn't the promissory progress that ›we‹ are most proud of and most prize, necessarily and always, inevitably and inexorably, leading to, greater and greater rights and freedoms, and ultimately 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 mitigated and mediated and thus not harmful to others.

Moderator Alexander Koch

Alexander Koch

Paul, was that a public lecture that we were hearing from you? Our panel is about the public and the popular, and I think you have ambivalent feelings about the role you are playing in the art world, that we all are playing here. You are aware that we are acting in a silo and continuously contributing to class distinctions, since contemporary art is one of the mechanisms that draws these distinctions. At the same time you also hold the other vision that we may contribute to overcoming the divides that capitalism has created. It's quite hurtful to see the double role we play, and it seems to me that in your practice, in your writing, in your use of popular music and media, you are trying to negotiate that uncomfortable situation. Is that correct?

Paul O'Kane

I think that this idea of ›holistic relativism‹ that I use there, and that I used in the title of another paper that I published in Third Text Online a year ago (which was actually quite directly about Brexit and Brexit was in the title); well that title finished with the clause ›Towards a Holistic Relativism‹, so I suppose that concept is something that I hold dear and try to allow to guide me or undermine me or something like that. I think it's very challenging. To me, maybe I'm naïve, but it seems to me that maybe that's the ultimate challenge, this ›holistic relativism‹ of the progressive project.

When I was working on the final versions of this paper, it seemed to me that, although it's a pessimistic period, and we're in fear, ›on the back foot‹ as they say in English, something that *can* seem to rally hope is to remind ourselves of what the progressive project is in its biggest sense, and what it has been, where did it come from, where is it leading to, what is the point of it? etc.

This idea of holistic relativism reminds me of all of that. It threatens to make everything valueless, but at the same time it's the ultimate goal of our society, is it not? That we achieve *universal* rights, *universal* freedom, *universal* justice, *universal* equality, you see what I mean? And just remembering that this is the project, and that we have achieved some of those things. We do live in a society which is in some way successfully progressive, and we should celebrate that.

Alexander Koch

In your lecture you were also quoting Rancière who said that the left is always struggling from a marginal position. It tries to expand the notion of the we in order to establish new rules of equality, but it actually never provides the government. Which brings me to a problem I had with the concept of the carnival and the carnivalesque, as you described it and as Bakhtin describes it. It's an exception in the order of the game. It's basically a day, you said at least a day or in some cultures a longer period of time, when all hierarchies become non-existent in a playful exchange of masquerades and identities. Yet it seems to me that even in ancient times the carnival has, as a precondition, the hierarchical struggle that is within a society as its backdrop. A struggle that is suspended for a moment, when the king can be playfully de-crowned and re-crowned and de-crowned. But this never changes the fact that the king actually keeps the crown on his head at the end of the day. So, it's a kind of social peacemaker, keeping the status quo in place. In that

respect, if we think about the carnivalesque in the 21st century, from a holistic utopia maybe, how far can we get with that concept, as beautiful as it is?

Paul O’Kane

I really enjoy Bakhtin’s essay and I think I have a different reading of it to the readings made yesterday (in Panel 1) when it was quite strongly criticised there as well. First of all, I imagine Bakhtin looking at the kind of disaster of equality that the Soviet Union perhaps became. Maybe seeing that the attempt to reify equality turns into some kind of monster. But within that he starts looking around for other models of equality and seeing, oh, there’s carnival, this is a kind of equality, even if it’s for a day, it’s a way of raising up the image of equality. As we know, as artists, an image, a symbol, at least allows us to believe that something is possible. And so, it’s very important in that way. That’s part of my answer, just the beginning of it really.

But the other thing I wanted to say is that we should think of the carnival in a much longer curve of history. I started to think this relates to what Nietzsche was interested in about Dionysus and the Bacchanalian. These were obviously the roots of carnival. And so maybe we can think of it in much longer terms, that the carnival morphs, and Bakhtin did say this, the carnival morphs according to its different contexts, to changing historical circumstances, it dissipates and breaks-up, but little traces are still found here and there, in odd places. You see bits of carnival here and there, for example when we protest against Brexit all the newspapers talk about is the clever, funny signs and costumes we wear. So, I think of the carnival in that very long and broad way.

The last part of my answer is that, one of those changing historical contexts is the one that I mentioned in the paper about the post-work society. And if it’s true that the carnival is related to servitude, and that in a certain historical context it may have been abused by the lord, by the king, it wasn’t always necessarily that way. It may have been different before that time and it could therefore be different again. And so the post-work society may ... I even think that the amount of freedoms and play that we are already allowed in these rich Western countries etc. is a kind of carnivalesque everyday of a different kind.

Alexander Koch

I will just express a worry that I have: that the playgrounds of the future carnival could be controlled and owned by Facebook, YouTube and all these other commercial stages on which the carnival might happen and therefore actually not lead to more equality, because equality, as you also wrote in another piece, is actually about ownership. There’s a famous quote by Benjamin who said that fascism is bringing the people behind one idea without ever touching the rule of who owns what. And that leaves the class divide actually in place ...

Paul O’Kane

›Without changing property relations‹ (as Benjamin said).

Alexander Koch

Yes. Which is something you could also say about today's cultures of participation and the invitation that everybody can be part of something. Because a lot of the time it's more like a simulacrum, since the containers in which this participation happens are owned and controlled by some people, or by a museum as an institution for that matter.

I want to speak about something we need to bring into the discussion because you're an author. You say you're not an art critic, yet you write very sincere reviews. And talking about critique, there is something I want to clear out somehow. Critique for me is mainly the making of criteria. Criteria of judgment, criteria of what is important to describe and what not. And it seems to me, since criteria are not given to us, that we have to make certain choices. What are helpful and valuable criteria? And here, with regard to the notion of the public and the notion of the popular, I feel a certain tension or dilemma between them. It seems that the public is something that rather appears, arises from struggle, from conflict, from the need to debate. It's not just there because people love each other and share a broader conversation. Often, there is a serious reason to have this conversation. Whereas the popular may be based more on criteria of what is understandable for many, what is likeable for many, and maybe not so conflictuous. As a writer and artist, do you tend to contribute to a conflictuous kind of conversation, or are you tending to create, say, agreement and understanding among people?

Paul O'Kane

This is a personal question, isn't it?

Alexander Koch

Well, you're also a pop musician, you're a critical intellectual, so I also want to address your practice.

Paul O'Kane

I didn't expect to be asked such a personal question. What I will say about it is that my career, if I can call it that, immodestly, has fluctuated between fine arts and pop music and back again, and for most of my younger life I found that very difficult and quite painful, these conflicts, crashing between what seemed to me two quite distinct cultures, even though they seem so porous and so liberal and so free. In actual fact you do come up against cultures, silos, borders, edges. And all I can say is that I've strived, and I continue to strive to eradicate those borders, both outside myself and also inside myself. Because I'm not sure whether they lie outside or inside. And I think that is exciting, when I make progress with it. Writing about popular music is one way that I've been trying to do that.

Alexander Koch

I think it is very valuable and important to not hide or suppress these inner conflicts or this inner negotiation that's going on between these different spheres of political ambition and then a more abstract utopia that you also embody.

Paul O'Kane

It's kind of uncompromising, in my own modest way I refuse the borders.

Alexander Koch

Another question. What if populism was actually the carnival of our time? Because it's anti-elite, it's disruptive, it's de-crowning and re-crowning, it turns moral orders upside down, it implies the opposite of what is actually said, it presents itself as the exception of what is established. Those are all criteria coming from Bakhtin. All of those apply wonderfully to populism.

Paul O'Kane

Yes, it came up yesterday, in Panel 1, and it scared me because I hadn't really thought enough about the Alt-Right carnival, and it was a quite shocking idea to me. Although I had considered of course that many of our elected presidents and prime ministers etc. in the last few years have been bombastic clowns. I mean, Nigel Farage reads like a clown, Boris Johnson reads like a clown, Beppe Grillo is a clown. And the Ukrainian president is a comedian, no?

Alexander Koch

We have more and more of those.

Paul O'Kane

Yes, so we do have a kind of 'age of clowns' which was always on my agenda. I was always interested in the fact that there's a carnivalesque happening somehow in that peculiar way, which is frightening as well as terrifying, but these things are also, from our point of view as cultural theorists, fascinating. I re-wrote some of my paper last night after hearing more about the conservative version of the carnival and after thinking about it a bit more.

But also, what is probably the most difficult part to say in the paper is that, if we truly believe that the progressive project leads to some kind of ultimate goal, to this universalism that I talked about, then somehow, we do have to exchange and cede and incorporate and discuss with *everyone*. Everyone has to be in play in this universal progressive vision, which seems like a paradox. But obviously, everyone has to be there, otherwise it's war.

Alexander Koch

This is something that is very dear to me. You quoted, I think it was also Rancière, saying that 'the normal people' have competence, have experience, have responsibility, they have criteria, have discourse, have resources, all of which rarely ever are considered in the art world as being trustworthy or valuable. They are not really coming into the conversation, other than something that is being talked *about*. You wrote that there is actually no gaze back or no speaking back from the working class, if we stay in class metaphors. And I think with regard to critics and intellectuals, who have usually a different set-up of resources and competences and social standards, this is maybe a political challenge to integrate into the future making of criteria.

Alexander Koch

Now, let's open up to the floor.

Reuben Fowkes, London, UCL and Translocal Institute:

One thing that was most striking in the film were the costumes, the walruses. I was thinking how carnival is breaking down barriers between different societies and different social identities, but how it might also be about going *beyond* the human. It's interesting to see that these people are putting so much effort in posing by the sea as walruses, and you can't help thinking that today you might not see this in the Shetland Islands anymore because of climate change and the sixth extinction. When you said that this local cultural activity has been destroyed by three decades of globalisation, it made me think that what we are talking about might not only be globalisation but the rise of an extractivist model of industrial capitalism and the great acceleration which really starts in the 1930s. So the carnival might reveal *this* tension, too.

Paul O'Kane

Your question makes me think that the most universal of rights we are pursuing is not just the rights of *all* human beings but of animals and the planet itself, which are now on our agenda every day.

Belinda Grace-Gardner

I was thinking here of Jeremy Deller's approach, how he has actually imported a popular culture into the world of arts in a powerful way I think. It was one of my favourite exhibitions when he first showed his archives. And my idea of what you are transporting here is actually an anarchic spirit of the carnivalesque, which is maybe more prevalent also in popular culture, and thus may be not so easily usurped by populism.

Paul O'Kane

Yes, one of my favourite artworks too is the video that Jeremy Deller and Allan Kane compiled by going around Britain and all these tiny villages, finding their strange rituals and rites. It's astounding to watch. I love that kind of thing because it steps outside of the usual institutions of art etc. But just to say regarding the 'anarchic', I'm not sure where that sits within it to me because the carnival is always disruptive by nature. Isn't it always anarchic?

Belinda Grace-Gardner

What I mean to say is that it's not so easily controllable.

Paul O'Kane

Yes, hopefully these cultures are so deep-rooted and strange, and the people themselves can be loyal and then disloyal, and so hopefully, we're seeing (with populism) something that the more ancient tradition of carnival can nevertheless refuse and transcend.

Sasha Craddock, art critic and curator from London

I want to mention that many countries still have carnival, and then it's strangely surprising to see these other things that happen, for instance the Alt-Right having its own carnivalesque. The fact that colonies and other whole parts of the world have actual carnival is massively important. I'm not saying that for very liberal reasons, but in order to talk about the idea that another world is possible and the fact how quickly things always get absorbed and controlled.

Sarah Wilson

Firstly, the expert on globalised carnival is Claire Tancons, a contemporary of Jeremy Deller. Secondly, when you're talking about the future society without work, the actual problems of work as so-called leisure, *Les loisirs de l'ouvrier*, were discussed as early as 1895 in the context of the Second International. An administrative and policing perspective asks 'what the hell are we going to do with these human cogs in the wheel when they're not actually in their machinery?' This is a question that people have been thinking about since the 19th century.

Susanna Sulic, art critic from France

I think the film speaks about Viking carnival, which means it was something that came from far away. I remember the rituals of ancient people and how they were related to a sun festival, to something religious, once a year at the beginning of Spring. This was then superimposed on some occidental rituals in religion and then superimposed on the festive days of the end of the year. And what about Brazil's carnival? I remember, the Brazilian carnival was a popular event not for the working-class people but for the lower class, for people out of class. And it was showing all that was hiding in the society. It was not such a rich carnival, the people worked for one year to make the costumes. I agree that now we are in a global carnival. But what does it mean? A lot of carnivals everywhere? It was poor – now it becomes a brilliant palette of a new brilliant society. Artists like Hélio Oiticica were using the carnival as a revolutionary aspect of art, and of participation.

Alexander Koch

Thank you very much. Unfortunately, we have to come to an end.