

Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin's Poetics of Folklore

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Images of reversal twist through many folklore traditions, celebrating the poor fool who becomes king and condemning the powerful to ruin. For Mikhail Bakhtin, such reversals express the creative energy of "a carnival sense of the world." In carnival, laughter and excess push aside the seriousness and the hierarchies of "official" life. Carnival shakes up the authoritative version of language and values, making room for a multiplicity of voices and meanings. Bakhtin's theories of language emerge from this space of multiplicity. By discerning between different modes of discourse, Bakhtin shows how "dialogic" language disrupts uniformity of thought.

In Bakhtin's work, the image of reversal symbolizes his intellectual ideal of rethinking: finding multiple levels of meaning in words, images, and tones. The outrageous and contradictory images that make up carnival ambivalence require the activity of rethinking. Bakhtin's theories of carnival and discourse help folklorists to discern multiple semantic levels in social and philosophical interaction. In the narrative, song, and ritual of many traditions, ambivalence creates a flexible realm of meaning that holds socially transformative potential.

A number of folklorists began to use Bakhtin's philosophy of carnival soon after it became known in the West,¹ finding it useful in understanding the structures of carnival and power relationships in diverse traditions. Bakhtin's theories of dialogue are meanwhile finding more and more resonance among folklorists recently. Since the image of carnival sets the stage for his theories of dialogue, I will concentrate primarily on elaborating Bakhtin's approach to carnival, as it relates to folklore. I will then discuss how different folklorists have used Bakhtin's theories, the advantages his theories have offered them, and the disadvantages they have noted.

The Philosophy of Carnival

Bakhtin's writing reflects the spirit of carnival: it defies systematic explanation. He imbues his key terms with unexpected and even shifting,

intertwining meanings. In this section, I will fix these mobile terms enough to indicate the main elements of carnival and their relationship to discourse. By grounding his philosophical explorations in subversion, laughter, ambivalence, and becoming, Bakhtin emphasizes the dynamic movement underlying “unofficial” language.

The fullest exploration of carnival in Bakhtin’s work is *Rabelais and His World* (1968).² In this book, Bakhtin argues that Rabelais’ 16th-century novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is based on, and can only be understood through, late medieval-early Renaissance “popular-festive forms.” *Rabelais and His World* describes an elaborate aesthetics of medieval peasant culture, referred to alternately as “the people,” “the folk,” “the second world,” “the unofficial world,” and “popular-festive culture,” defined against the “official world” of civil and religious authority. Bakhtin insists that readers can apprehend the true philosophical importance of Rabelais’ book only by listening with the ears of the 16th century, which were finely tuned to the aesthetics of the grotesque. The ideals that correspond to folk grotesque images of feasting, violence, and “the material lower bodily stratum” cannot be understood through the limited scope of convention. The grotesque expresses a pointed reversal of moral and logical expectations.

Carnival reversal implies a change from principles of stability and closure to constant possibility. Bakhtin notes that folktales usually end not with death—the order that life imposes—but with a banquet, for “the end must contain the potentialities of the new beginning, just as death leads to a new birth” (1968:283). The banquet features the collective carnival body, constituted entirely of openings. The carnival emphasis on orifices, both physical and conceptual, emphasizes the absence of individual boundaries in the medieval imagination. Mouths, for instance, are always open, eating and drinking, laughing, shouting: they take in and commune with the outer world and never shut it out. This openness corresponds to a cosmic openness: nothing is fixed in Bakhtin’s carnival world, and everything is in a state of becoming.

“Official” authority is subverted most of all by laughter, a current of slippery ambivalence. Through laughter, “the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint...Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter” (Bakhtin 1968:66). It is not the objects of laughter, though, that interest Bakhtin so much as the perspective laughter brings. Laughter emphasizes movement and draws attention to the forms of relationship, rather than the components within the relationship, which are often fixed in one-sided, hierarchical meaning: “The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations,

and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation... Laughter, on the other hand, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations" (90). The peasants' world is a "second world," resistant to the official world and aware of the power of ambivalence, the simultaneous (and contradictory) value of high and low, death and life, rich and poor. To emphasize the creative power of carnival imagery, Bakhtin imbues ambivalence with physical force: carnival abuses, for instance, "while humiliating and mortifying [...] at the same time revived and renewed" (16).

Bakhtin indicates that carnival images of ambivalence were strong enough and cunning enough to hold off, if not the fearsome official powers themselves, at least the internalization of those powers. Like the city walls that Rabelais' Panurge proposes to build from "women's pleasure-twats," carnival's defense of human freedom is ridiculous, and viable for that very reason. Carnival keeps the official axe, ever-ready to descend on the unruly heads of the folk,³ in a state of uncertain hesitation, and in that moment of authority's hesitation is the triumph of carnival.

Laughter works philosophical changes upon life and society. Laughter erupts from the collective body, but its most important function is internal; it defends freedom of thought. Thus the life of the body and its relationship to the world, represented in the culture of "folk humor," intersects with the internal processes of perception, thinking, and speaking: the fundamentals of Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue.

Bakhtin takes the idea of carnival from its agricultural and Christian origins as a promise of new growth, and expands it to represent "a feast for all the world," "a feast of becoming, change and renewal" (1968:10). This universalized image of carnival allows him to develop the concept of the "carnival spirit," which enters modern culture through the genre of the novel and especially through the work of certain novelists like Dostoevsky and Rabelais. Thus Bakhtin borrows the flexibility of the value of "becoming" for his own theories: by revealing the "deep philosophical meaning" of obscene or grotesque carnival images, he traces "carnivalization" through an enormous variety of genres, specific works, and historical times. This expansive methodology has enabled folklorists to apply his theories productively to such diverse subjects as riddles, puppetry, and folksong, as we shall see.

Images of "becoming" link the celebration of the body and the material world with the folk philosophical concept of time. By paying close attention to the relationships between objects (mouths, anuses, food, excrement), Bakhtin reveals a hidden network of values. The image of becoming expresses hope for the future, which Bakhtin contrasts to the "official" preoccupation with the past that renders life pre-determined and unchangeable. Bakhtin

associates the past with mythology and authority, distant and impenetrable to human life, and understands interest in the open orifices of the human body as an artistic way of shaping the future by passing the material of the world through them.

Extravagant feasting and peeing herald carnival creativity, representing “the pathos of change and renewal” (Bakhtin 1968:11). Rabelais presents a huge variety of means of passing the world through the debasing and regenerating human body. Bakhtin responds to Rabelais’s outrageous physicality with ennobling analyses such as that of “the swab episode,” where Gargantua lists different objects he has used to wipe himself. Bakhtin quotes Rabelais:

Once I mopped my scut with the velvet scarf of a damozel. It was pleasurable: the soft material proved voluptuous and gratifying to my hindsight...The next time it was her neckerchief; again, her crimson satin earpieces, but they were bespangled and begilt with beshitten jewelry that scraped my tailpiece from end to end...Next I wiped myself with a hat,..then in turn with a pillow, a slipper, a gamebag and a basket—faugh! What a thorny, unpleasant bumduster. (1968:371)

Bakhtin notes both chaotic freedom and carnival logic in the swab episode, which forces the reader to re-examine her ways of thinking about things. Each object is evaluated in accord with its efficacy as a swab, completely apart from its original function...[the objects’] unexpected new function conjures up their visible, material outline” (1968:372). This new materialization of the object de-neutralizes and renews it. Like the seed that must be buried to sprout forth, words must flop in the mud before they can come to life. While the written word often connotes an abstraction of life that kills its vitality, Rabelais acts more like a midwife than a scribe: he probes among the bloody throbbing guts of the world to bring the word to life. And it is from popular carnival, Bakhtin insists, that Rabelais has learned his art.

Dialogic Freedom

At the end of *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin lays the groundwork for his philosophy of dialogue that later publications develop. He argues that

the influence of the century-old hidden linguistic dogmatism on human thought, and especially on artistic imagery, is of great importance. If the creative spirit lives in one language only, or if several languages coexist but remain strictly divided without struggling for supremacy, it is impossible to overcome this dogmatism buried in the depths of linguistic consciousness. (1968:471)

In his philosophy of dialogue, Bakhtin explores the interaction of languages, which, he stipulates, are philosophies, as they function at individual, historical, and generic levels. The folk ideals of “the many” and “openness” that the Rabelais book developed become the operative structures of Bakhtin’s philosophy of dialogue.

A brief word about how Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue emerges from carnival images will suffice for now; I will develop it further in the context of Bakhtinian applications. Bakhtin’s theories work rather like puppet shows: different characters and voices convey the same sorts of relationships in different contexts. The characters of carnival reappear in Bakhtin’s later work in the form of types of discourse. The function of “official culture” reappears in the image of “authoritative discourse,” or “monologic discourse”: a one-sided word that claims absolute truth. “Dialogic” discourse, like the image of carnival activity, responds and moves; like the open and incomplete carnival body, it is always growing and always open to other words. “Multi-directional discourse,” meanwhile, resembles the ambivalent and subversive language of the marketplace, simultaneously debasing and renewing, revealing and hiding, selling and entertaining.

Carnival and Folklore

Many folklorists have recognized the fruitfulness of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival for describing the elements of carnival that they observe around the world and in literature and in history. The convergence of the philosophical, artistic, and political that Bakhtin effects in his theories helps folklorists to identify several simultaneous levels of meaning in texts. Close analysis of these levels of meaning in specific contexts requires more precise analytical tools than Bakhtin’s carnival philosophy can provide; however, his theory of dialogue offers a wealth of such tools. Here I will describe only those aspects of “dialogicity” that relate directly to carnival, as they have been used by some folklorists.

Applications of Bakhtin’s “carnivalization” tend to emphasize subversion, social relationships, and ambivalence. Folklorists refine and develop Bakhtin’s theory by making use of their close contact with performance contexts. This enables them to discuss elements of reversal and ambivalence that Bakhtin’s broad literary study overlooks. Recent attention to ethnic, class, and gender marginalization has given a new range of meaning and complexity to the dichotomy between “official” and “unofficial” culture.

In his book *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes* (1991), Roberto da Matta studies the reversal of hierarchical norms, both social and philosophical, that characterizes Brazilian Carnival. He writes, "At Carnival everything is 'sung.' Song, indeed, is the form of participation that is possible and legitimate. Through singing songs, everybody becomes equal and understands each other" (110). Singing is not only a festive act but also a philosophical concept: it provides for the possibility of change, re-ordering of life at all levels, public and private, external and internal. Da Matta, like Bakhtin, finds ambivalence at the core of carnival philosophy. He explains the carnivalistic role of the *malandra*, the rogue:

The Brazilian rogue seems to introduce the possibility of relativization into the closed world of everyday routinized morality...the rogue tells us that there are other dimensions and other social ways [besides those of economic position and political capacity] by which people and social actions can be classified: "I'm poor but I've got my girl, my guitar, and the moonlight," as a famous Brazilian song reminds. (1991:131-32)

Da Matta's description of the rogue illuminates the sense of fearlessness and creativity that the element of ambivalence brings to "the second world" of folk culture.

The problem of ambivalence enters da Matta's own analysis in an interesting way when he compares Brazilian Carnival with New Orleans Mardi Gras. He opposes the levelling of hierarchy that occurs in Brazilian Carnival to the process of New Orleans Mardi Gras. The latter reproduces hierarchical distinctions of real life in exaggerated form, so that, for instance, the king of carnival is not the poor and marginalized worker as in Brazil, but a white millionaire. He suggests that "on the ritual level the Carnival of New Orleans seems to reproduce the deeper truths of class exclusivism in a society that claims to have banished hierarchy from its central midst" (da Matta 1991:129). These very different forms of carnival share the idea of inversion: carnival reverses the hierarchical society of Brazil to represent an egalitarian one, while it reverses the egalitarian society of the United States to represent a hierarchical one.

In fact, it is precisely the hierarchical nature of Cajun Mardi Gras that some folklorists emphasize when applying Bakhtin's theory of carnival. Critics of the theory maintain that carnival reinforces existing power structures. Carl Lindahl, for instance, in his "Bakhtin's Carnival Laughter and the Cajun Country Mardi Gras" (1996), argues that Bakhtin's preoccupation with creative growth and flexibility disregards the importance of tradition in constructing carnival. The role of tradition renders the image

of carnival far more structured and hierarchical than Bakhtin presents it—in fact, Lindahl and others argue, it brings carnival much closer to the “official” culture that Bakhtin opposes it to. Lindahl writes, “Bakhtin errs in ignoring the absolutistic shell that shapes carnival license” (63).⁴

Analyzing the central event of Mardi Gras, the hen hunt, Lindahl notes some important correspondences with Bakhtin’s theory of carnival: the destruction and wildness of Mardi Gras, represented by the squad of masked hunters descending on chickens, includes creative and regenerating elements. Yet a strict structure always dominates this creativity, which, Lindahl adds, was just as true of the Renaissance France from which Cajun Mardi Gras evolved. He articulates a common criticism of the ritual reversal celebrated by Bakhtin: “on the darker side, the lower classes—in duplicating the power structure of their leaders—simply reaffirmed their submission to the social order” (Lindahl 1996:65). Lindahl’s study of the “self-imposed rules” of carnival seeks to fill in the gap of “disorder,” created by Bakhtin’s image of anarchic “folk humor,” with a socially and historically concrete image of carnival “order.”

Dialogue and Folklore

Bakhtin’s interest in liberating relativity meets less opposition when he moves from carnival to dialogue. His theories of discourse involve deflating the myth of impersonal language: “there are no neutral and objective words” (Bakhtin 1968:160); rather words hold infinite layers of complexity. The concrete identities of speaker and hearer, and their relationship, each person’s intentions in speaking and in hearing, and the contradictions within each person, the tone and context of the words, all these elements shape an utterance more than the literal meaning of the words.

Catrina Kelly’s *Petrushka* examines the history and culture of the fairground performance of Petrushka puppet shows and its translation into literature and ballet. Like Bakhtin in his defense of Rabelais, Kelly complains of inadequate intellectual appreciation of Russian popular art. She considers the foul-mouthed, crafty, ugly, violent, happy Petrushka a perfect embodiment of the subversive, grotesque, ambivalent carnival that Bakhtin describes. She suggests that only in Russia is the full dialectic between official repression and folk subversion played out in full. This implicitly counters the arguments of Lindahl and others before him, who criticize Bakhtin’s oversight of the support carnival structures provide “official” culture. Kelly writes, “outside the Soviet Union, the politically subversive and morally ambivalent nature of the street puppet theatre is denied by an interpretation which makes Petrushka the proponent and lackey of authoritarianism, not its violent enemy”

(1990:178). Ambivalent language provides a unique space of freedom from both political authority and the internalization of authority latent in ordinary language.

The interplay of carnival and dialogue in the image of Petrushka is the special focus of Frank Proschan's article, "Puppet Voices and Interlocutors" (1981). Proschan explores the liberating possibilities of Bakhtin's discourse theory through analysis of Petrushka's and other puppets' speech mediums. He notes the importance of the mediation of the interlocutor (in Petrushka shows, the musician), who skillfully clarifies Petrushka's barely comprehensible (because purposely distorted with a mouthpiece) and poetically illogical language, and represents the rational world of the audience. The figure of the interlocutor draws attention to the difference between puppet language and human language, marking the space of "play" and creating an ambivalent domain of meaning where words can be, as Bakhtin writes, "invested with a new valuation" (Bakhtin 1984:161). Proschan explains the cognitive effect of this "play": "The audience's work is expanded, their interpretive burden enlarged, as their creative role expands. For it is the audience's role to make sense of this collision of worlds, this dialogue between the systems of human and puppet communication" (1981:551). The exchange between audience and performer concretizes the theory of dialogue that Bakhtin presents only in literary form; by focusing on the role of the audience in the construction of meaning, the dynamics of interaction gain more clarity.

In her article "Spirits and Voices in Tamil songs" (1988), Margaret Trawick examines the performative effect of songs on their audience, illuminating an implicit dynamic in Bakhtin's work. She too connects Bakhtin's carnival theory to his theory of dialogue, and just as John Dorst (1983) uses Bakhtin to focus on a marginal life situation (the neck-riddle), Trawick uses him to focus on the doubly marginalized voices of women "untouchables" in India. The untouchables (Paraiyars) of Southern India are a unique embodiment of Bakhtin's image of the grotesque. Their untouchability is expressed in their role as caretakers of the "dirtying processes and products of [the] body" (Trawick 1988:196): gravedigging, disposal of excrement and garbage, and other such work is their domain.

Trawick notes the peculiar function that the Paraiyar songs play: "not, as a rule, to maintain the status quo or commemorate it, but...to effect some kind of change in the singer's situation by moving some particular party in the audience to feel and act differently from before" (1988:200). The affective force of the songs indicate that aesthetic factors determine social response. "The more powerful is her intended audience and the object of her criticism, and the more counter to social codes is her message, the more careful she

must be, and the more the singer must resort to subtle, even subliminal, means of persuasion" (200).

The songs use such opaque means of persuasion that Trawick initially "misread" the most powerful songs, thinking the singers were confused. The songs mix up verb tenses and gender and generational references in a bewildering way; but through Bakhtin's discourse theory, Trawick discerns philosophical significance in these mix-ups. The songs express a collective self, crossing temporal and spatial bounds, rather like the self Bakhtin posits in his Rabelais book, incomprehensible to the Western individualist sensibility. Sensitivity to the real meaning of a song requires that the listener/reader pay close attention to the ways voices interact within it. Thus, in laments, for instance, the persons of the living and the dead can become merged to ease the separation, while in lullabies the voices of victim and victor can merge to soften "the sense of victimization" (Trawick 1988:10).

Trawick's analysis of the interconnecting selves and ideas in Paraiyar songs offers a crucial key to Bakhtin's own dialogue with his subjects. Her observation of the merging identities of mother and child, victor and victim in the songs corresponds closely to Bakhtin's interest in the merged identities of healer and actor, entertainer and writer in folk culture and in Rabelais's novel. The songs' multivalent meanings that aim to change the perspectives of their hearers represents a view of art that Bakhtin's fleeting reference to the writer as healer underemphasizes, the performative role of art. Yet Bakhtin's constant insistence on the regenerating power of folk aesthetics indicates that he saw regenerating potential within his own work as well. His subtle allusions to his own investment in the ideas and language of his subjects make it clear that philosophical values of carnival shape his own writing.

Bakhtin's theories have a unique capacity for growth; their living, fluid quality discourages systematization. They cohere most in their mission to defend the integrity of the unfamiliar voice—whether it belongs to a 16th-century red-faced peasant or a sorrowing Indian widow. Bakhtin's presentation of carnival is not a prescription or a realization of utopian ideals; it is itself an artistic response, ambivalent and aimed at transforming not actual conditions but the ways of thinking of his hearers. Folkloric applications of Bakhtin's theories of carnival and language suggest that through awareness and creative manipulation of diverse modes of discourse, individuals can effect changes in their lives and beings when freedom of action is limited—a condition of life even in non-repressive societies.

Notes

1 Written in the 1930s as a dissertation and published only in 1962 in Russia, *Rabelais and His World* was first translated into English in 1968.

2 Bakhtin also studies the roots of the novel in “carnival genres,” with special reference to Rabelais, in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984) and in the essays collected in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981).

3 Bakhtin notes that Rabelais’ clowning style allowed him to make deeply subversive statements without, like his friend who was far less subversive but spoke directly, losing his head. The same might be said for Bakhtin himself, who narrowly escaped dying in Stalinist purges (see Clark and Holquist 1984).

4 See Eco’s article in the book *Carnival!*, also Michael Bernstein’s *Bitter Carnival* and Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson’s *Mikhail Bakhtin* for further criticism of Bakhtin’s “naive” idea of carnival. The latter authors caution “Bakhtin ignores the dangers of carnivalistic violence and antinomian energy” (1990:470), which are codified and legitimated by carnival.

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Suggested Readings

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