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Of shite and time

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Why does a young man have sex with a freshly baked apple pie in *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999)? Why do the bridesmaids in the eponymous film (Paul Feig, 2011) suffer diarrhoea and nausea in a pretentious bridal store and why is the bride-to-be made to defecate in the street outside while wearing a florid wedding gown? Notorious scenes like this are intended to make us laugh: why might they be funny? Mikhail Bakhtin never saw these films, but he already knew the answers to my questions. They were set out in *Rabelais and His World*, first published in English translation in 1968.¹

Reading *Rabelais and His World* is a heady experience, though 'heady' is hardly the apt word; better to say that to first encounter Bakhtin's explication of the 'carnavalesque' and 'grotesque realism' is a *visceral* experience, given that *Rabelais and His World* is concerned with a poetics of the lower body. Bakhtin's long book has had the influence it has had not because of its place in Rabelais scholarship but because it provides, even in sometimes clumsy translation, the tools and vocabulary to describe a whole area of ritual human behaviour and 'low' laughter that often eludes both the approval and the understanding of 'official culture' - and, as academics, I am including you and me in that abject category (I return to the abject below). If you laughed and spluttered as I did at the sight of *Bridesmaids'* woman in a wedding dress with explosive diarrhoea and were obliged to explain why to the appalled person beside you, then reading *Rabelais and His World* is an empowering experience.

Bakhtin dubs 'carnavalesque' an anarchic aesthetic that employs and celebrates the body-based and chaotic elements of popular culture (by which Bakhtin means the 'culture of the people') and that refuses all authority. Carnavalesque laughter in the face of the given order gives it a Utopian aspect: '[The] carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things' (p. 34). The carnivalesque is expressed especially in the grotesque. For Bakhtin the carnival body is an abundant and corpulent thing of 'apertures and

¹ I refer here to the 1984 edition: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

convexities' (p. 26); it is a body 'in-becoming', permeable to and continuous with the living and dying world. The carnival body is also a 'social' body, representing the cyclical character of life in society, where individual mortality is not tragic but the necessary condition of birth and regeneration. What Bakhtin calls 'grotesque realism' expresses a material and 'degrading' vision of the world. All that is spiritual, respectable and 'high' is brought low. And so, in the carnivalesque *American Pie*, we have the emblem of the wholesome American family made the warm receptacle of teen penis, while, in *Bridesmaids*, a commoditized symbol of virginity and nuptial union is defiled by shit.

My examples so far have been from Hollywood, but Bakhtin was essential to my work on the popular but critically deplored Italian Christmas films known as *cinapanettoni*.² The *cinapanettone* lends itself to analysis in carnivalesque terms: it is associated with a festive suspension of quotidian norms, with the cycle of renewal marked by the death of the old year and birth of the new, and with rituals of cinema-going typically involving groups of friends or family.³ Its employment of coarse language and ridiculing of cultural pretensions or conventional moral priorities (or the revelation of their hypocrisy) are perfectly consistent with Bakhtin's account of carnivalesque laughter. I will give a good example of content in a moment, but the carnivalesque is also a question of form. The writer Francesco Piccolo (perhaps best known for his work with Nanni Moretti) describes as follows the screenplay for *Natale a Miami* (the 2005 *cinapanettone* directed by Neri Parenti):

Non sono le cose che accadono [in *Natale a Miami*] a far scaturire eventi e dialoghi e quindi la comicità, ma il contrario. [...] Il sistema è rovesciato: si parte dalla fine, dalla risata. E poi, bene o male, si risale fino a un personaggio o a una storia. Ma è meno importante: incongruenze, verosimiglianza, bellezza, trama - tutto è meno importante della situazione che fa ridere.⁴

There can be no argument with the accuracy of Piccolo's analysis, but of course he means it as the sternest criticism; what he fails to see is that the inversion or refusal of a conventional aesthetic norm (that laughter ought to emerge 'organically' from character or story) is *precisely the point*.

² Alan O'Leary, *Fenomenologia del cinapanettone* (Soveria Manelli: Rubbettino, 2013). See also my research blog at <<http://holidaypictures.tumblr.com>>.

³ See Francesco Piccolo's description of the *cinapanettone* audience in 'Una tonnellata di equivoci', *L'Italia spensierata* (Rome: Laterza, 2007), pp. 91–130.

⁴ Piccolo, 'Una tonnellata di equivoci', pp. 104–5.



Fig.1 Boldi and the last mummy in Natale sul nilo

One of my favourite instances of the carnivalesque is found in *Natale sul Nilo* (Neri Parenti, 2002), the most commercially successful *cinapanettone*. A Carabinieri general (!) played by Massimo Boldi, rotund and baby-faced grotesque body par excellence, drinks tainted water and has an attack of diarrhoea during a tour of the Great Pyramid. Cue forthright sound effects suggesting the flop of faecal matter and whinnies of relief from the alcove the general is forced to use in lieu of a toilet. The general finds what he takes for toilet paper and unrolls an ample supply in case of further need. A droll tracking shot reveals the stuff to be instead the swaddling bandages from the last intact mummy in the pyramid (Fig. 2), which the general unwittingly reduces to dust before the shocked gaze of a tour group. Boldi's destruction of the archaeological treasure pits the physical against the claims of Culture and precipitates the final death of the mummy, once itself, of course, a feeding and defecating body that has since had its materiality disavowed (it must not be touched) in the transition to heritage exhibit. The sequence confirms Bakhtin's intuition that 'excrement is gay [i.e., joyous] matter', 'an intermediate between the living body and dead disintegrating matter that is being transformed into earth, into manure' (p. 175). This is carnivalesque 'ambivalence' as Bakhtin describes it: the (necessary) process of degradation is continuous with one of regeneration, and so we find the mummy 'reanimated' soon after in the film when Boldi's co-star Christian De Sica dances vigorously while dressed head to foot in mummy costume (the 1986 hit 'Walk Like an Egyptian' playing, inevitably, on the soundtrack).

Like the study of popular Italian cinema, Bakhtin's work has always had its sceptics. For a contemporary reader, *Rabelais and His World* fails to earn its length and, as with an Ayn Rand novel or Gian Piero Brunetta, it can invite speed reading. Despite its prolixity, the discussion can be imprecise and there is much slippage between the key terms of 'carnavalesque' and 'grotesque', while 'grotesque realism' itself is fuzzily defined. More serious are the political criticisms of the idea of the carnivalesque. Many have noticed that Bakhtin is gender blind even though his account of the grotesque is built on sometimes violent images of women, images presented by Bakhtin as carnivalesque and therefore comic.⁵ From this perspective, I recognise that my Hollywood examples above might well be construed as misogynist. The broader problem, though, is one of the potential for a macho and hectoring interpretation that asserts humour as a value that presides over all others (one can imagine the pressure to conform-by-laughing admirably resisted by my companion during the scene in *Bridesmaids*).

Terry Eagleton has written that 'the necessary political criticism [of the carnivalesque] is almost too obvious to make':⁶ carnival is *licensed* transgression. In similar vein, Umberto Eco has asserted the essential conservatism of carnival in that it reinforces the status quo by functioning as a filter of subversive impulses.⁷ Eco points out that carnival has historically been used as a means to *stifle* popular revolt, and suggests that it continues to be so used, inasmuch as the mass media operate a 'continuous carnivalization of life' that substitutes pleasure for politics.⁸ Bakhtin's commentators have responded to such criticisms by suggesting that the ambivalence of carnival extends to its political character.⁹ The carnivalesque - the *cinapanettone*, for instance - is neither essentially progressive nor essentially reactionary but takes on a particular political character only in its reception or employment by empirical constituencies.

Let us take for granted, then, that Bakhtin's account, which is aspirational as well as analytical, needs to be properly qualified and needs to be supplemented

⁵ We know that carnivalesque fictional violence has very real-world cognates, not least in historical carnival itself, where women who refused patriarchal norms were subjected to humiliating rituals of charivari. See Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 176-81, for a summary of some gender-based criticisms of Bakhtin on the carnivalesque.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, 'Carnival and Comedy: Bakhtin and Brecht', in Walter Benjamin, or *Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 148.

⁷ Umberto Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', in T. Sebeok (ed.), *Carnival!* (New York: Mouton, 1994), pp. 1-9 (p. 6).

⁸ Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', p. 3.

⁹ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 16.

in order to be adequate to our purposes. His undifferentiated category of 'the people', defined only in terms of class, has to be nuanced with attention to intersectional questions,¹⁰ and, crucially, we need to add the notion of the abject - as developed by Julia Kristeva, of course, with an eye to Bakhtin's work.¹¹ Drawing on Kristeva, we can account for the ambivalent politics of the carnivalesque in terms of the tremendously useful idea of 'displaced abjection'.¹²

While Bakhtin makes big claims for the liberating effects of carnival and for the joyous resistance to power encoded in the carnivalesque, the antic behaviour characteristic of carnival has often been at the expense of the socially marginal rather than the powerful.¹³ 'Displaced abjection' refers to this process in which the weaker are abused by those who are themselves weak. 'Comic' verbal or physical violence against so-called 'categorie deboli' - women, homosexuals, disabled and/or non-white characters - perpetrated by the white Italian heterosexual able-bodied male protagonist in the *cinapanettone* is an example of this phenomenon.¹⁴ My argument would be that the process of displaced abjection in the films reveals as unstable each of these terms (white, Italian, heterosexual, able-bodied, male), and demonstrates that the category they constitute is inherently insecure. The marginal characters, targets of violence and victims of humour, clarify by what they are not the lineaments of the normative identity but their necessary reappearance in film after film points to the fragility of the identity thereby established: a double or displaced abjection.

Bakhtin's account also needs to be supplemented with the insights of anthropology, and these allow us to get beyond any narrow focus on comic film to find aspects of the carnivalesque in cinema as such. As Victor Turner writes:

¹⁰ Mary Russo genders Bakhtin's categories in 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory', in Teresa de Lauretis (ed.), *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 213-29, while Diane Roberts discusses race and the grotesque in the introduction to *The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Sue Vice has described the abject as the 'modern grotesque', a carnivalesque that lacks the regenerative force Bakhtin saw as characteristic of the medieval and early modern version. *Introducing Bakhtin*, pp. 162-76.

¹² Stallybrass and White introduce this powerful notion only in parenthesis, though they do place it in italics, in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 19. It has been suggested to me that the foregrounded abjection (a version of 'crisis') of the white male in the *cinapanettone* is just another way of asserting his centrality, but that is a discussion for another venue.

¹³ A feature of the Roman carnival was the humiliation of the residents of the Jewish ghetto. Such behaviour is meta-discursively foregrounded in the early parade scene in *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006), a quintessentially carnivalesque text.

¹⁴ 'Categorie deboli' is the term used by Christian Uva in his critique of the ideology of the *cinapanettone*. See 'La politica del panettone', in Michele Picchi and Christian Uva, *Destra e sinistra nel cinema italiano: film e immaginario politico dagli anni '60 al nuovo millennio* (Rome: Edizioni Interculturali, 2006), pp. 165-72 (pp. 169-70).

simpler societies have ritual or sacred corroborees as their main metasocial performances; proto-feudal and feudal societies have carnival or festival; early modern societies have carnival and theatre; and electronically advanced societies, film.¹⁵

By 'metasocial performance' Turner has in mind those 'liminal' periods when a society or culture articulates or tests in ritualized form its understanding of itself. Such periods are characterized by a 'subjunctive' mood heavy with potential: an anything-may-happen time (and space)¹⁶ in opposition to the 'indicative' time of workaday existence. If film has been a preeminent form of metasocial performance, and we can agree that it was in the last century at least, attendance at the cinema must itself have had ritual aspects while individual films will have regularly probed established forms of social organization and allotted social roles (fixed gender identities for example).

Political cinema offers a choice example of film as metasocial performance. Firstly, the consumption of political cinema will often take place in ritualized contexts like film clubs or as part of festival seasons, and it will tend to be accompanied by discourse that marks out the viewing of such films as exceptional events. Secondly, political cinema is concerned to assert the relative nature of existing conditions so as to allow a different order of things to emerge.

¹⁵ V. Turner, 'Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6: 4 (1979), 465-99 (p. 468).

¹⁶ The metasocial performance happens in a demarcated time and also place – a church, a square, a stadium etc. Sometimes the time of metasocial performance is figured as space, as in Shakespeare's enchanted forests where identity and gender become fluid, or like the 'abroad' of the cinepanettone, always framed, in the films, by the leaving and returning home. Turner's reflections on the space-time of metasocial performance return us to Bakhtin again, in the form of the Russian's writings on the 'chronotope'.



Fig. 2 Cross-dressing revolutionaries in *The Battle of Algiers*

Take *La battaglia di Algeri* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966): it may seem glib to say so given its grim subject matter of torture and terrorist bombing, but this is at root a carnivalesque film which pictures a ritualized performance in the subjunctive mood during which unruly behaviour, cross-dressing and so on, are experimented with (Fig. 2).¹⁷ While such experimentation is characteristic of liminal periods, the aspect of potential - what Turner calls the 'ultraliminal' - may also exceed the parenthetical time.¹⁸ This is what the film shows and what it makes its audience *feel*. The film's most explicitly carnivalesque moment comes in its famous coda when the 'battle' plot is ceded to choral protest riots by the Algerians against French occupation, a coda experienced as invigorating by many viewers. This euphoria (which here replaces Bakhtin's 'carnival laughter') marks the recognition of the ultraliminal; the liberatory potential of the carnivalesque is literalized as national freedom. Furthermore, the death of Ali La Pointe, the film's revolutionary Algerian hero, at the end of the main story is a quintessentially ambivalent carnivalesque motif: the Algerian protagonist in its grotesque 'social body' aspect, escaping the Casbah to heave and flow through the European city, is generated from Ali's death.

¹⁷ The film contravenes cinema convention by granting privileged mobility to women (rendered invisible by the veil, or in European 'cross-dress') while male revolutionaries must impersonate women at street level, or move along Casbah rooftops, or they become fixed (arrested) in interiors.

¹⁸ For Turner, the ultraliminal is "the perilous realm of possibility of "anything may go" which threatens any social order and seems the more threatening, the more that order seems rigorous and secure" (Turner's italics). 'Frame, Flow and Reflection', p. 478.

This deep carnivalesque symbolism is key to the film's rhetoric and address but, as the reader will know, *La battaglia d'Algeri* has typically been discussed, instead, in terms of realism or in terms of the ethics of violence. Bakhtin shows how we can usefully shift our attention from ethics to anthropology, and how we can offer a more sophisticated analysis of the appeal of a range of film forms, from the lightest comedy to the most didactic committed cinema. It seems to me that Italian cinema studies needs to get back to Bakhtin.