

Becoming Carnival: Performing a Postmodern Identity

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Dawn breaks over the stage of the 21st-century carnival. A stage already set, and a set already staged – the two-fold sign of a heteroglossic multiplicity that contextualizes the contemporary self. An age of imitative being and possessed role-play. The well-charted collapse of meaning, and its consequences in the loss of identity are misread under the sign of the meaningless, however.¹ And what is missing here is the awareness that with the collapse of meaning comes also the collapse of its opposite. For with the collapse of the meaningless comes, inevitably, a mandate for play – but a mandate that is performative (as opposed to prescriptive). A state of self already in play, waiting simply to be noticed, theorized and played with. A 21st-century feast of fools, which negotiates its culture of boredom by carnivalizing the stage of its appearance.

And with this, a 21st-century carnival. Not the carnival as it has progressed, developed and grown, but as it re-emerges under a sign of Bakhtinian influence. Which is to say the rendering of the carnival as a performative strategy in order to recontextualize Bakhtin in terms of a contemporary thinking. For our equivalent to the hierarchical (medieval) society in which Bakhtin's carnival is played out is a society of revolt against the self; no longer a subversion of aristocracy, but rather a nihilistic subversion of identity itself. And as a consequence of this, identity becomes carnivalesque, performance of

the self becomes its method, and Bakhtin's heteroglossia becomes first a xenoglossia, and then a gestural glossalalia.

And the project at hand holds as its aim a recontextualization of this sort – in the attempt to show how carnival attitude can be used strategically as a method of dealing with the contemporary nihilism of the self. A recombinant carnival that draws on concepts, reappropriates and recontextualizes them, in terms of possibilities rather than meaning. An ambivalence then towards the theoretical and historical contexts in which such discourse generally proceeds, not in order to deny meaning, but rather simply to acknowledge from the start a heteroglossic understanding of the world. And not just the world, but the self too. A textual alchemy of sorts that seeks a performative counterpart in the free-play of the self.

And to think the self carnally is to chart its transformation from a static state of identity (constructed or otherwise) to the fluctuating state of its perpetual becomings. *The carnival, not as a license to be free, but rather now as a free license to become.*

I. CARNIVAL RE-THINKING

And to begin, a look at Bakhtin's carnival. Not the carnival as it actually is or was, however (i.e. not an attempt to recapitulate or reconstitute the carnival under the sign of historic truth), but the carnival as constituted by Bakhtin, used to recontextualize the possibilities of a contemporary identity. In this way,

a look at the carnival as both the subject and the method of study.

And above all, it is a carnival spirit that is important here. For the carnival was a celebratory event in medieval times, one taken up to relieve the pressures of official life, and official rules. A mocking and a subversion of these rules instead, but one that rejuvenated while degrading (Bakhtin 1984: 90). And in this formulation what seems like an overt paradox (between mocking and renewing) must be asserted as not paradoxical at all, but rather simply the way in which the carnival (and carnival laughter in specific) was conceived of during medieval times.

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.

(Bakhtin 1984: 10)

In other words, the carnival was a period of sanctioned play, in which the official truths of the social world could be replaced by the unofficial truths of a festive subversion. Thus a truly ambivalent celebration – one that did not respect official boundaries and instead played with all that was official and serious. The carnival was ‘life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play’ (Bakhtin 1984: 7).

Or perhaps this can be taken further still, for Bakhtin emphasizes the self-reflexive nature of carnival celebration – as an ambivalent critique, but one also that always includes itself in its subversions. A critique then that is always, at least in part, aimed at oneself and one’s participation in social institutions and official ideologies. In other words, though the carnival does subvert a social hierarchy, it also functions as the simultaneous subversion of one’s own place in these structures. And it is in this way that the carnival allows for the ambivalent subversion of oneself. Not a stepping out of the roles one normally plays, but a stepping into a role that

mocks the limitations normally imposed upon oneself, limitations that one both upholds and subverts in carnival participation. It is a necessarily participatory attitude that thus accompanies the carnival, at least in the sense that one always performs both the subject and object of a carnival critique: ‘the people’s festive laughter is also directed at those who laugh’ (Bakhtin 1984: 12).

And one might consequently suggest that one does an injustice to the concept of the carnival if one seeks to remain outside of it in analysis. A dangerous suggestion perhaps for a paper of this sort, for the task becomes one not only of an engaged analysis, but of an analysis according to the terms of that which is under scrutiny. Not the juxtaposition of an outside logic onto the concept of the carnival, but a carnival thinking that is itself carnivalesque.

Carnival Imitation – Becoming Heteroglossic

And this, of course, is merely the suggestion of a contextual analysis. A suggestion that finds its referent in Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia – a principle that privileges above all, a contextual placement of meaning, and an acknowledgement of meaning as contextual.

At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under other conditions.

(Bakhtin 1981: 428)

And if Bakhtin could avoid thinking the carnival from a carnivalesque standpoint, it is only because he chose to place it historically, as an analytic concept rather than as a way of being. An object of study, necessary in order to understand the ambivalence of humour in Rabelais, but itself really a historically contextualized interpretive filter. A model to be placed into the lexicon of his study. But what happens when this model is invoked as the subject of its own analysis? No longer the Bakhtinian placement of carnival as a medieval phenomenon,

but a placement of the concept of carnival in terms of its performative consequences, which is to say an event that can not only be analytically invoked, but also one that can be re-placed in terms of its potential strategic and political possibilities. No longer simply a medieval subversion of everyday social life, the carnival can now be seen as a model for the (parodic) performance of identity itself.

And parody itself, not then as a cynical critique of meaning, but a playful subversion of the conditions upon which a social meaning is grounded. A convoluted position to be sure, for as the parody enacts the inverse roles of the social self, so too does it reinforce precisely the collapse of meaning which renders the self a function of its social roles. And if the carnival can subvert, revive or renew the participation of a self in a social world, it is only because it makes apparent the transparency of social meaning to begin with. For it is not just the carnival that imitates, but the study of the carnival itself that sets its method as that of remaining within the confines of a carnival thinking. In other words a study that necessarily aims to imitate itself, to double back on its own criticisms and to enact the assertions it seeks to make.

And a redefinition of carnival imitation then, wherein its process becomes inherently heteroglossic. And not just Bakhtin's textual heteroglossia, but a performed heteroglossia for a carnivalesque participation that seeks to remove the conditions of structural and textualized meaning. For it is ultimately these forms of meaning that cause the social stasis that makes the carnival necessary. And the assertion then that if one can take on various identities, including those taken up both within and outside of participation in the carnival, the state of identity is no less contextual than the state of meaning itself. A simple reformulation of Bakhtin's definition really, in that now: *At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions that will insure that a self acting (participating) in that place and at that time will have an identity different than it would have under other conditions.*

And all of this simply to suggest that the carnival is necessarily ambivalent and inclusive. Not merely

an analytic model, but a performative positioning. For as carnival laughter is both mocking and renewing, it is also not devoid of its own truth. Rather, and this perhaps must be emphasized, *the carnival laughs seriously*. In other words, one must avoid the tendency to be too serious (or to read too seriously) when speaking of carnival, lest one be accused of misunderstanding the concepts one invokes. An ambivalent role-play then, one that is, of course, more play than role, but neither to the exclusion of its opposite, the 'real' being – or perhaps better stated the *real becoming*.

Becoming Animal

And if the carnival self is one that is ambivalent in its participation, it is precisely because of its twofold relationship to laughter and seriousness. An attitude that bears strong affinity with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming. A becoming that is not precisely a becoming something different, but rather an ambivalent becoming of sorts. A liberation from a *specific* role that necessarily entails the embracing, not of a *different* role, but of the *space between roles*. And as the carnival is resistant to the static and complete, so too a becoming self works in the spaces between completion: 'the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 249).

And the becoming-animal is of special importance here simply because of the recontextualization of the carnival as a self-reflexive performance. A subversion of the roles embraced in day-to-day life. And a contemporary becoming that struggles against the self, subverting the constraints of the human by becoming animal.

Do not imitate a dog, but make your organism enter into composition with *something else* in such a way that the particles emitted from the aggregate thus composed will be canine as a function of the relation of movement and rest, or of molecular proximity, into which they enter.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 274)

And so, to subvert the static nature of a self-as-human, what better way than the enacting (the

‘entering into composition’) of the non-human. Carnival possibilities for the self, in face of the static position it occupies, and which now perhaps provide at least an impetus for the exploration of other roles. And the becoming-animal is, of course, only one form of becoming open to the carnival self. Yet it is a form of particular import for one cannot take oneself too seriously if one is becoming-animal. Rather, the becoming-animal is from the start a parodic and liberating endeavour – one whose ambivalent seriousness is tempered by an ambivalent laughter. Perhaps it is only the animal who laughs seriously after all.

And if the becoming-animal runs the danger of overly personifying the characteristics of the non-human, it is also a strategy to avoid precisely the personification of the self-as-human. Not simply the creation of imaginary possibilities with which the self can engage, but also an assertion that the self is already personified. The acknowledgement that one gives human characteristics to oneself, not because one already has them, but because the personified understanding of self is necessary in order to relate to the world. And the becoming-animal is, in fact, an inverse personification – no longer properly human characteristics given to the animal, but animal characteristics taken on by the human. And the becoming-animal then is only possible because there was no human condition to begin with. Rather, only a daily enactment of becomings-human, to which a carnival self responds by becoming-animal.

II. THE CARNIVAL SELF

And then, in order to develop this project one might begin with an analysis of the players in this carnival of the self. A congregation of fools, but fools of course in the carnival sense. Which then is to say not fools at all, but idiot-savants and savant-idiot. And the first of these, the one to blame if blame is at all the issue, is not Nietzsche but his carnival double: Zarathustra.

Blame Nietzsche

And might it not be suggested that there is a particular brand of carnival reflexivity to *Thus*

Spoke Zarathustra? For it is here that Nietzsche creates not only a manifesto against the world, but also a character to negotiate his chaos. And consequently, not really the hostile anti-realist that he is so often made out to be. Rather, a carnival Nietzsche that seeks the degradation that will ‘revive’ a social world. A degradation that begins with the death of God but steps much further, in that with the death of God comes the birth of that particular brand of autonomy that does not acknowledge the conditional provisions of existence. Like Bakhtin, Nietzsche too is hostile towards all that is ‘immortalized and completed’.

And yet Nietzsche’s world is not like Bakhtin’s. For with the death of God comes also the death of authority in all forms. And consequently, there is no ‘sanctioned’ carnival for Nietzsche to engage with – no structured forum in which his subversions can take place. Rather *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is an attempt to come to terms with autonomy in a godless (and unsanctioned) world.

Truly, I advise you: go away from me and guard yourselves against Zarathustra! And better still: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he has deceived you. . . . One repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil. And why, then, should you not pluck at my laurels? You respect me; but how if one day your respect should tumble? Take care that a falling statue does not strike you dead!

(Nietzsche 1969: 103)

And with Nietzsche, of course, a paradox emerges here in the prescription of autonomy. For insofar as autonomy is precisely that which cannot be prescribed (by God, or by the teacher), the self after Nietzsche is placed in a peculiar position by which autonomy is always an autonomy of subversion. And in this, read Nietzsche then as a philosopher of the carnivalesque – one who places autonomy in precisely the mechanism of carnival behavior, without the social sanction of the carnival event.

Nietzsche through Foucault

This issue could be put differently. In a world where there is no truth, there are only roles and players. Consequently either we are God’s carnival

or He is ours. And Nietzsche preferred the second. Not the crowning of a fool as king (as might have happened in Bakhtin's world) but the killing of God as a symbolic carnival gesture of liberation.

From this perspective, the philosophy of Nietzsche is one of a parodic and subversive autonomy. However, a background analysis of the contemporary self is not appropriately articulated without a simultaneous look at the persistence of this 'autonomous' self after Foucault. For if Nietzsche can be credited with the birth of autonomy, it is Foucault who initiates its subversion. And if Nietzsche is a carnival hero par excellence it is only because Foucault allows us to read Nietzsche as, not only a philosopher of autonomy, but also of carnival futility.

For Nietzsche's autonomy is short-lived in Foucault's world of normalized voice and social conditioning. A world, ultimately, that denies both the prescriptions for autonomy and individuality. Or rather perhaps, a world in which the self must inevitably be seen as a function of the world around it – incapable of a truly autonomous voice.

Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.

(Foucault 1979: 170)

And with Foucault it is not quite fair to say that identity itself is rendered useless, but one must certainly grant a transformation here in terms of what individuality might mean. For it is not just 'discipline' that makes individuals, but also social conditioning and 'normalizing judgment' (Foucault 1979: 183). And yet, despite this social programming, the notion of Nietzsche's autonomy does not disappear. Rather it is rendered contextual, becoming itself a 'normalized' position.

Consequently, read Nietzsche's prescriptions for autonomy as the normalized voice par excellence – the paradoxically 'conditioned' claim of individuality. And the warning of taking the teacher too seriously (lest one misses what is being taught), finds its counterpart in the analogous taking of the self too seriously. For the bigger danger to an

autonomous voice is not the realization that one speaks a teacher's words, but that one's own words are not one's own.

And, in the end, the voice that tells us of normalization is not different from the voice that tells us of autonomy. It is only that their paradox is different. For Foucault is not a figure of liberation here, but the inverse. A counterpart to autonomous voice no doubt, and far more cynical than Nietzsche. For one must read Foucault not as liberated from normalization, but as contained by it – to the same extent and with the same implications as anyone else. In other words, the observation of social conditioning does not remove it. It is not a transparent mechanism, but an ingrown one. Read society then as viral, behaviors as conditioned, and voice, inevitably, as possessed. And normalization then becomes a philosophy of possession – 'inner' forces that are derived from with-'out'.

Carnival Heteroglossia – Becoming Possessed

And an *enacted* heteroglossia is indeed the *carnival* heteroglossia of the becoming-animal. A becoming that has become aware of its contextual existence. Dependent on the world around it, whether in response to a social hierarchy or to social conditioning. A carnival heteroglossia that responds to all that is depersonalizing, in the world and in itself. A response thus to questions of training, education and social roles, but also to the inevitable pressures of conditioning and normalization. Not properly a liberation; rather a personification of these questions and pressures.

Possessed by the unyielding and inescapable social conditioning to which the self is subjected. Not properly an exorcism, but only a chance to play with and subvert the social conditions that one cannot control. A question of the forced imitation that accompanies participation in a social order – a literal role-play, but one that expects, and indeed requires, the enactment of specific behavioural norms, appropriate to the social position occupied. And a carnival participation that grows simply from the acknowledgment that one is already, and

inescapably, possessed. An enacted heteroglossia in its contextual reliance is indeed a becoming-possessed.

Becoming Parrot – Becoming Monkey

And so the first of the becomings-animal is not the Camel of Nietzsche's 'Three Metamorphoses'² but rather the Parrot. And to ask the question of the becoming-parrot is to ask an ironic, double-edged carnival question of becoming-imitative. A parrot who, with a little urging, can develop a limited vocabulary. A parrot who repeats surely, but here too context is important. For the intrigue of the parrot, and what reveals it precisely as a carnivalesque form, is that its voice is rarely spoken appropriately. Rather, a parrot's vocabulary is one of repetition – an imitative voice that (arguably) understands little of the sounds it makes. Rather, a performance of the sounds which someone else has made – an enacting of someone else's voice.

And in some ways, Nietzsche's critique could be construed as a critique of the becoming-parrot. For one need only imagine Zarathustra in a room full of parrots, uttering the fateful words: 'think for yourself'. And in the chaotic repetition of these words that inevitably ensues, the paradoxical echo of autonomy persists. And though ironic to speak of free speech to a room full of parrots, Nietzsche does precisely this – addressing his accused as though he himself were not one of them. But we know better, for if Nietzsche could speak of freedom, it means only that he was still living under the sign of an autonomy he created. His own words, the ambivalent echo of an *ironic parrot*.

And Foucault's world then is no longer simply a world of becoming-parrots, but of becoming-monkeys. Not simply the voiced repetition of words of freedom, but the behavioural mimicry that is a result of normalization. The enacting of individuality under a sign of Pavlovian conditioning. And the banality of the autonomous parrot becomes itself parodic in the image of the organ-grinding monkey, dressed in a dapper little costume

and trained to collect money from passers-by. Also, and insofar as the monkey is trained to perform certain tasks, it is trained out of performing others. Conditioned to perform; conditioned out of the possibility of subversion. And yet, the becoming-monkey, like the becoming-parrot, holds an ambivalent position in its performance. For it makes of *all* monkeys carnival figures, and of *all* individuals, monkeys. No longer discipline that makes individuals, nor even a discipline that makes monkeys, but *monkeys that make discipline*. For one must not read Foucault as an 'independent' mind outside of the social conditioning he discusses. Rather, himself a monkey, trained to look at particular manifestations of power. A *punk monkey* to Nietzsche's *ironic parrot*.

Not the parrot crushed by a falling statue, but the statue smashed by a punk monkey.

III. TOWARDS A CARNIVAL POSSESSION

And so the carnival under scrutiny here is indeed a carnival of identity, of becomings-parrot and becomings-monkey, and their cacophony of imitative voice and action. And the inevitable attempt to understand precisely what form the self takes in this context. The search for an understanding of what roles are left for the self to play. It is, ultimately, an attempt to restore ambivalence to the carnival, which is to say a search for a sense of humour amidst the intense depersonalization of free will and autonomous voice. And the re-emergence of a carnival thinking that seeks to negotiate the intricacies of becomings and social possession. For whereas the imitative and possessed behaviours of the becomings-parrot and monkey may well serve to undermine the *truth of a self*, the carnivalizing of these concepts may mean their recovery, in a peculiar way. For the carnival does not pretend to be other than imitative, and despite its derivative nature, it still serves to rejuvenate and renew the characters that participate in it. And it is with a similar logic in mind that the question of the contemporary self can be approached.

The Posthuman and the Possessed Individual

And a self then that is in several forms of tension. First of all, the tension between autonomy and social conditioning. Also the tension between voice and action. And finally the tension between the carnival and life – and more specifically the tension created by precisely the collapse between the two.

And to clarify the position here in regard to the consequences of Nietzsche and Foucault (the becoming-parrot and the becoming-monkey), a rephrasing as undertaken by Katherine Hayles in the proposal of a theoretical transition from humanism to a ‘posthuman’ environment:

If ‘human essence is freedom from the wills of others,’ the posthuman is ‘post’ not because it is necessarily unfree but because there is no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will.

(Hayles 1999: 4)

And this clearly is the same problem, reformulated, as that which results from a reading of Nietzsche through Foucault. The difference, of course, is that this state is constituted in Hayles *as* a state, rather than as a consequence of the death of God or the extent of normalization. In other words, the contemporary self has, as its condition, the negotiation of precisely this paradoxical state. And in its constitution *as* a state, Hayles allows for a carnivalesque response.

And it is this same project that is taken up peripherally by Arthur Kroker in *The Possessed Individual*. Requalifying the Lockean notion of ‘possessive individualism’, where individuality is a subject of its material construction/consumption, Kroker suggests the inverse – not that the self is not constructed, but that it is not constructed *by itself* (Kroker 1992: 5). Rather, the self is *possessed* by the world that qualifies it. Not a dissimilar assertion to that made by Foucault, except in the consequences that Kroker draws from this. For Kroker, the result is a ‘designer subjectivity’ for an individuality possessed primarily by technology, but also through extension by all aspects of a normalizing world.³

‘Possessed individualism’ is subjectivity to a point of aesthetic excess that the self no longer has any real existence, only a perspectival appearance as a site where all the referents converge and implode. . . . no longer a private subject in a public space, but a public self in a private imaginary time.

(Kroker 1992: 5)

And read ‘designer subjectivities’ then as a strategic placement of the possessed self. Not an autonomous placement, but one that retreats to an imaginary autonomy in response to (or despite) the world of phantasms that surrounds it. The self as site then, and the medium of its own social possession. Channeling the spirits of technology and individuality. Not only made to imitate, but reworked and recoded to fit the possessed landscape it inhabits.

And read the ‘posthuman’ also as a designer subjectivity of sorts – a stepping out of the futile search for freedom, and a focusing instead on the site of the channeling self. A site then where there is no distinguishable ‘self-will’, but certainly one where there are distinguishable ‘other-wills’. And to distinguish then the sources of possession is (again) not to remove or even to subvert them. Rather it is only to begin to perform them as they play with the possessed self.

Carnival Possession – Becoming Channel

And the enactment of possession in the carnival, then, is a reversal of roles between the self and the social forces that possess it. Not independent of possession, however, for though altered, the relationship persists. And it is not an exorcism that occurs with the carnival enacting of possession. Rather, a recontextualization of the relationship one already has with social forces and normalized behaviours. One in which one is no longer a victim of social conditioning but in which one performs (in) it. A possessed play, and a playing with possession. In other words, a carnival possession that is a becoming-channel. Becoming-medium, and the channeling of social forces in which one ‘designs’

one's own relationship to them. And this, ultimately, is what a 'designer subjectivity' really means – not the freedom from possession, but its carnivalization. A channeling of social forces that is ultimately the only thing that allows one to play-along. *Not a resistance to possession, but an acknowledgment of its inevitability.* And though the self-as-site is always a channel, the choice here is that of volition, the choice between involuntary channeling and ambivalent (carnival) engagement with one's channeled self.

Becoming Platypus

And the possessed individual is not possessed by any *one* thing, but by many – a heteroglossic possession that through multiplicity resists a static qualification as anything *in specific*. Rather, a collaged identity of sorts, pieced together, and viral in the sense that its identities are imposed (caught, infected). It is an identity of contagion and possession, and an identity thus prime for becoming. And the becoming-animal of the possessed individual takes on a rather paradoxical non-form, not the becoming of any one thing in particular, but the becoming of many things in particular. A becoming-platypus – a piecemeal non-entity that is simultaneously an ambivalent pastiche *of itself*. Inherently parodic, the becoming-platypus has no self image. Its image is a carnival image of many other things – part duck, part beaver, part venomous snake – the anomalous mammal that lays eggs, but also the nocturnal water dweller. The platypus indeed is a peculiar animal – that walks like a lizard and scans for food using electro sensors rather than its eyes or ears. The chimera of Bakhtin's festive carnival (Bakhtin 1984: 96) takes on its ideal form in the becoming-platypus. For the becoming-platypus is neither human nor animal, but inherently hybrid.

And as such, a unique identity awaits the becoming-platypus, for it is from the start a subversive becoming. And if the platypus were not so compelling an animal it would be different, but its form is an inherently fascinating one. A flesh-collage of sorts, but not dictated by individuality,

but by species, and even then a trans-species species. Ultimately, in and of itself, a carnival species – for its 'nature' is unnatural – distinctive only through its identifiability as non-distinctive. The platypus as possessed flesh, and the becoming-platypus then as the possessed-self taking on a possessed form. Channeling a diversity of species into a hybrid archetype. And in this, the inevitable failure to recognize oneself, except as a collection of 'other-ness'. The case of the becoming-platypus is the case of manifest heteroglossia.

Caught in a perpetual state of becoming, the platypus holds that peculiarly contextualized place of forever being caught in the act of becoming, caught between species, caught between roles. And the becoming-platypus then as the *active channeling of the in-between*. The becoming-collage, held together only by the interplay of that which possesses it; that which it enacts. And read the becoming-platypus then as lycanthrope, not in the sense of an unwilling change to animal form at the command of the full moon, but rather as a multiplicity of unwilled changes colliding into its own possessed form.

IV. A XENOGLOSSIC CARNIVALESQUE

And the figure then of the becoming-platypus as the starting point for further reflections. Not the attempt to exorcise a possessed self, but only to acknowledge the constraints (and consequently the possibilities) of a possessed being. Confronted by an inevitably familiar world, and by an unbearably fragmented self-image, the becoming-platypus strives no longer to subvert the world, but only to subvert its absent self. A strange breed of carnivalesque for such a figure – in the parody of absence.

Žižek and the Spectral Trace

And if the conclusion of the becoming-platypus is the performance of a 'channeled individual' as opposed to a 'possessed individual,' then one might suggest then that the division between self and world begins here to dissolve. No longer a self in opposition to the world, but only in opposition to

itself. For the world, though viral, is familiar. And the self takes on a distinctly uncertain presence in face of its own unfamiliarity. But also, and inversely, a distinctly certain non-presence as well. And it is this question that is examined by Žižek in his contemporary radicalization of psychoanalytic theory:

The ultimate goal of psychoanalysis is not the confessional pacification/gentrification of the trauma, but the acceptance of the very fact that our lives involve a traumatic kernel beyond redemption, that there is a dimension of our being which forever resists redemption-deliverance.

(Žižek 2000: 98)

And a dimension of our being which forever resists certainty or knowledge as well. In other words, a dimension that is *fundamentally carnivalesque*, in the sense that it forever resists completion and remains always ineffable, dynamic and changing. And also thus a part of the self that is inherently parodic – an ambivalent ‘inner’ self that resists identification. An identity then, of uncertainty – perhaps the only reasonable conclusion to the question of the possessed and channeling selves. Also, the psychoanalytic implications here, that such uncertainty is unavoidable. And not traumatic consequently, but rather carnivalesque – a self forever beyond the reach of itself, a conclusion that Žižek explains by quoting Daniel Dennet’s ‘bizarre category of the objectively-subjective – the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don’t seem that way to you’ (Žižek 2000: 83).

And not only a self that acts differently than it thinks it acts, but one that thinks and speaks in words that are not its own. A spectral self, the in(di)visible remainder of a possessed (channeled) individual. And a designer non-subjectivity too – in the sense that all knowledge under this sign of the spectral trace becomes *possessed knowledge*, and the inaccessibility of the self ceases to be traumatic under a project of self-acceptance, or ‘coming to terms’.

But one might just as easily suggest that it is not a ‘coming to terms’ that is in order for a spectral self, but rather a free play that results from the

removal of the condition of self. For ultimately, what a spectral and inaccessible self means, is that the project of *deciphering* a self beneath conditioning, possession and even channeling, is ultimately a futile one. Once accepted as such, once the trauma of uncertainty is dealt with, the possibilities of self take on a distinctly liberating form. And not merely a carnival subversion, for there is nothing left to subvert, *except the distinct lack of substance to the spectral self*. And all of this not to suggest that there is no self underneath the forms that possess it, but that the self, itself is simply one more of these channeled forms.

Carnival Channeling – Becoming Xenoglossic

And it is here that the becoming-channel truly becomes a carnival channeling. No longer simply an enacting of possession (as channel), rather now the awareness that beneath possession there is nothing to enact. Appearance *only* through that which one channels. Everything else is spectral. And a reversal here in that one is no longer undermined by the forces of a social possession, but rather the self is precisely that which haunts a channeled form. Inaccessible and spectral. Appearing only according to terms that are not one’s own. Parrot speech, monkey action and platypus appearance.

And a carnival participation then that speaks in a language it no longer understands. Rather any utterance is that of a possessed self, all that appears is that which is non-spectral; non-self. Speech and action (and a self) that occur inevitably and only in a language of unfamiliarity. And for the unknowable self, an unknown language. A becoming-xenoglossic – the ability to spontaneously speak a foreign language without first having learned it. A language that one does not speak, but one that might be understood if only there were someone around who knew it (Goodman 1972: 149). Words (and actions) that mean something to the world, but whose meaning is inaccessible and unknown to the self that performs them.

Becoming Lizard: The Unwilling Chameleon

And for the spectral self, a spectral becoming – not in the sense of becoming-spectral, however – that would be beside the point. Rather, the subversion of spectrality in the taking on of form. And not just any form here, for the indivisible remainder of the self is precisely that which becomes apparent by becoming-chameleon. And there are two distinct forms that this becoming engages with. The first is the chameleon’s peripherally placed eyes, yielding a vision that spans almost an entire 360 degrees. For the becoming-chameleon sees very well the world in which it participates – yet it is a sight that emphasizes the paradox of not being able to see one’s own, spectral self. And this is true with any sight, but particularly with that of the becoming-chameleon – the abundance of things to be seen in the world around merely emphasizes the fact that the self remains always obscured to itself.

And if that weren’t already enough, the becoming-chameleon too has to contend with its ever changing colour. The chameleon’s transparent skin holds viral layers of pigment that change colour independently of its will, in response to the light, shadows and temperature of its surroundings. And the traumatic kernel of the spectral self comes back in a tangible form here, for the becoming-chameleon changes colour independently of its own desires. And the ‘coming to terms’ of the becoming-chameleon is the ironic realization that though it may not understand the world it participates in, that world somehow understands it, enough at least to compel it to change colour in response to its environment. The world flows through the becoming-chameleon, one might say the world is its virus. And the becoming-chameleon thus always represents, in image, a part of the world it is unable to speak. A xenoglossic becoming – compelled to perform, but always according to terms it neither controls nor understands. Not simply a derivative voice, but one that speaks in a language that only the world around it understands.

V. A CARNIVAL GLOSSALALIA

And if the becoming-chameleon is an unwilling participant in its own appearance, it is only because it has misread the implications of Žižek’s spectral self. And this only because there remains a difference between the ‘coming to terms’ with spectrality and its embracing as a mechanism of self-subversion. For one who is literally spoken by the world in which it participates, the mood of the chameleon is as essential as the forms it assumes. The taking-on of forms, *any* forms, not only because such is the inevitable condition of a spectral self, but also because of the consequent subversion of absence through *playing present*.

Baudrillard and Impossible Exchange

The xenoglossic condition of the becoming-chameleon takes on a renewed form in this playing of presence. The becoming-chameleon of course, does not control the reactions it produces, but it does control the way in which it looks at the world around it. Its xenoglossic glance subverts the self by speaking in a language it does not understand. Yet one that simultaneously asks of the world to understand it. The key to the xenoglossic: although one does not understand the language one speaks, ostensibly *someone else might*. And here we encounter an assumption about the world around us – an assumption that even if the self is spectral, the world of possession is real.

And it is this assumption that Baudrillard takes up in *The Vital Illusion*, and later in *Impossible Exchange*, asserting not only that there is no real, but that there is no fictional equivalent to it either. There is only a radical uncertainty, not only on the part of the self, but also on the part of the world it lives in.

Everything starts from impossible exchange. The uncertainty of the world lies in the fact that it has no equivalent anywhere; it cannot be exchanged for anything. The uncertainty of thought lies in the fact that it cannot be exchanged either for truth or for reality. Is it thought

which tips the world over into uncertainty, or the other way around? This in itself is part of the uncertainty.

(Baudrillard 2001: 3)

An uncertainty then that collapses the distinction between the spectral self and the world it lives in. And it is not one that influences the other, except insofar as such influence is construed. In other words, with impossible exchange the condition of the world disappears – or rather the condition that the world must have a form. However, the rendering of the world as uncertain means ultimately the subversion of a static world-form in favor of an unstable and multiplistic performance. A non-self then, in a non-world – which is not to suggest that the world does not exist, nor that the self does not exist, but rather that both exist without form. Their forms (both those of the self and the world) *become* (as opposed to *are*). A form thus that exists only as it is played and played with. And it is indeed a paradoxical position, for no form is off-limits, not the form of truth, not the form of falsity. A coming to terms with impossible exchange means that the world becomes a playground – its own carnivalesque, in which there is no longer one carnival but many, no longer one world to subvert, but as many worlds as we choose to acknowledge (construe).

To challenge and to cope with this paradoxical state of things, we need a paradoxical way of thinking; since the world drifts into delirium, we must adopt a delirious point of view. We must no longer assume any principle of truth, of causality, or any discursive norm. Instead, we must grant both the poetic singularity of events and the radical uncertainty of events.

(Baudrillard 2000: 68)

And with this paradox comes the removal of the final form of necessity – the necessity of sense. For even sense falls into the scope of impossible exchange, and consequently opens the door for the pursuit of the nonsensical. And not simply a retreat into private fantasies of the world, but an engaged participation with world as an ongoing carnivalesque. And indeed this formulation returns to the

Bakhtinian carnival in precisely its subversion of necessity itself:

Necessity, in every concept which prevails at any time, is always one-piece, serious, unconditional, and indisputable. But historically the idea of necessity is relative and variable. The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit . . . destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities.

(Bakhtin 1984: 49)

Carnival Xenoglossia – Becoming Glossalalic

A chameleon's world, rendered itself invisible – itself dependent on, and changing in accordance with the environment. A performance of what is inherently unknown; a double feedback loop – one short-circuiting, the other eternally deferred. Not simply the xenoglossic self, but now a xenoglossic world as well. A world which does not understand what it says, and a self that doesn't either. And such is the carnival xenoglossia, the unknowable self in an unknowable world. And the result is a carnivalesque nonsense. Not a meaningless nonsense, but an uncertain, gestural participation in which nothing makes sense, yet the gesture towards the unintelligible is all that matters (Goodman 1992: 12–13). A glossalalia – a speaking in tongues – in a world and with a self that are no longer intelligible.

And it is no coincidence that glossalalia is so often attributed to religious experience and trance. For in its production of nonsense (and indeed it is at this point a production, in both the material and theatrical sense) the glossalalic enacts itself. It is no longer an attempt to 'come to terms' with a spectral self, nor even with the world around. An acceptance rather of the radical uncertainty of an ambivalent existence; a state without conditions – or a conditioned non-state. A world seen through the xenoglossic filter of the self, no longer with the expectation that one might say something meaningful, but rather now only the ecstatic experience of being free to say anything at all. And any content that might emerge would be purely

coincidental from a glossalalic perspective – entirely beside the point. Rather, it is a position that under-rides the contextuality of meaning (both heteroglossic and xenoglossic). It is not a position devoid of context, but one of *pure context*. Context without the supposition of meaning. A becoming–devoid of substance, not to subvert spectrality, but now rather only to embrace it. A becoming–invisible for a non-sensical world.

Becoming Jellyfish: Dance of the Hydromedusa

And the final stage of becoming is a paradoxical one; the becoming–impossible that awaits those who embark upon a project of tongues–speak. An unknown self in an unknown world, no longer the luxury of the chameleon’s world that somehow understands it – the world too is now unintelligible. And the invisible self, the becoming–jellyfish, dances in a floating freedom of ‘new potentialities’. A gestural being for a nonsensical world. No longer a world that flows through it, but a becoming–jellyfish that performs as it flows through an unseen world.

And the jellyfish is indeed endowed with a degree of invisibility – an image–less body that appears and disappears contextually: ‘the visibility of an object depends on its contrast – its brightness compared with that of its surroundings’ (Johnsen 2000: 87). But no longer a heteroglossic context; rather a glossalalic one – one which no longer seeks the placement of meaning, but only the gestural possibilities of participation. A becoming–transparent, and a voice that speaks with the ironic humility of the nonsensical. Truly a parody of both the world and itself, the jellyfish lures its prey closer with phosphorescent lights, then disappears as the hunt begins. But the world too is impervious to the jellyfish, until it stings. And it is the sting of a bad joke – a becoming–joke that makes of the jellyfish the king of clowns. For ultimately, the becoming–jellyfish understands itself as invisible; it can only appear in collaboration with the world around it. Its mark is inherently performative, as is its becoming. And all jokes aside, it is the invisible creatures in the world that reveal that the world

was never necessary to begin with, and the *becoming–jellyfish that reveals a self that was never other than nonsensical*.

CONCLUSION

And the conclusion of this becoming–carnival is precisely the removal of the conditions of necessity that the carnival has always entailed. No longer simply the conditions of social living, or the response to a constructed and hierarchical medieval folk culture. Now rather, the subversion of all that is official, and more importantly the subversion of all that is sanctioned. No longer a sanctioned subversion of daily life, the carnival can be read as a performative strategy for the unlimited reinvention of reality and the self. And not a trivial or inconsequential position, for the double edge to a carnival reinvention persists as the gestural sincerity of a becoming–nonsensical.

Human beings, relieved of representation by their representations themselves, are at last free to be what they are without going through anyone else – and not even through freedom itself or the right to be free.

(Baudrillard 2001: 121)

And this is indeed a carnival question, a parody of the question of life itself, and ultimately of the impossibility of both life and death. It is a reminder of Shrodinger’s cat, an experiment set up as a disproof of probability theory, but one that ultimately reinforces the radical uncertainty of our social world.

Shrodinger imagined a bizarre experiment in which a live cat is placed in a box with a radioactive source, a Geiger counter, a hammer and a sealed glass flask containing deadly poison fumes. When a radioactive decay takes place, the counter triggers a device releasing the hammer which falls and breaks the flask. The fumes will then kill the cat. . . . Quantum theory (with the Born interpretation) would predict that exactly one hour after the experiment began, the box would contain a cat that is neither wholly alive nor wholly dead but a mixture of the two states, the superimposition of the two wave functions.

(McEvoy and Zarate 1996: 146)

And what better conclusion to a becoming-carnival than the image of a becoming-Shrodinger's cat? Neither wholly alive nor dead, but fluctuating in a perpetually uncertain carnival existence. Indeed, as the sun goes down on this 21st-century carnival, the only further reflection of becomings and parodies is the pale moonlight, replaced by the fading, laughing grin of Shrodinger's cat *becoming-cheshire*. And in the end, it is not only fear that laughter overcomes, but also the pressures of becoming.⁴

NOTES

1 Read, for example Baudrillard's assertions that with the breakdown of the criteria of evaluation (necessary for the construction of meaning) we are 'condemned to indifference' (1993: 18). Preferable to this, however, is the suggestion of a later Baudrillard that 'analysis is a parody of its object' (1998: 113). Under this later assertion, the collapse of meaning does not condemn us to indifference (meaninglessness) but rather to parody – a suggestion that what is missing is not meaning at all, but only our sense of humour about the form meaning takes.

2 Of Nietzsche's 'Three Metamorphoses' the Camel was the first, the Lion the second and the Child the third. The Camel here is spoken to signify the bearing of burdens. Not completely unlike the parrot, the first of the camel's burdens is a 'self debasement in order to injure its pride . . . to let its folly shine out in order to mock its wisdom'. The parrot of course has no need to bear this burden, for it is in its very nature to mock itself in a spirit of imitative folly (1969: 54).

3 Other aspects of this might include such elements as the depersonalization of the self though: language (Barthes 1977: 147), interpretation (Derrida 1993: 12), the image (Virilio 1994: 62) and even the unconscious (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 283).

4 Bakhtin: 'It (laughter in the face of fear) was not only a victory over mystic terror of God, but also a victory over the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden' (1984: 90).

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