A New Paradigm, Moving on from Bakhtin

Journal Item

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2022 The Author

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
https://www.festivalculture.co.uk/_files/ugd/c7dade_e9fe78aa47c74e708eeb504262ef9837.pdf

oro.open.ac.uk
A New Paradigm, Moving on from Bakhtin

Report: Workshop session conducted during the 2nd Annual International Symposium on Festival Culture (ISFC)

This was an engaging, workshop-styled session, with presentations by Jarula M.I. Wegner and Kim Johnson, who addressed the theme ‘A New Paradigm: Moving on from Bakhtin’. Along with several points and questions taken from the wider group, and discussion between the presenters, the session became a lively debate about matters of methodology and theoretical approaches to the study of Trinidad carnival, and of carnival in a more global sense.

Dr Wegner, setting out a survey of perspectives on Bakhtin, gave a concise look at the appropriateness of this celebrated thinker to better understand Trinidad carnival. He also reflected on the extant ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world. Narrating his personal experience of Trinidad carnival since 2009, focusing heavily on ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world. Narrating his personal experience of Trinidad carnival since 2009, focusing heavily on ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world. Narrating his personal experience of Trinidad carnival since 2009, focusing heavily on ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world. Narrating his personal experience of Trinidad carnival since 2009, focusing heavily on ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world. Narrating his personal experience of Trinidad carnival since 2009, focusing heavily on ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world.

Dr Johnson explained the ‘evolution’ of carnival as a means to meet the existing scholarship on carnival in a more dialectical way. Dr Johnson’s exploration proved to be a fully contingent and fitting response. Less concerned with characterising the surrounding scholarship on Trinidad carnival than in tracing the genealogy of carnival itself, Dr Johnson gave vivid introductions to diverse aspects of the festival, moving lightly across the longue durée of two centuries, from the cultural crucible of plantation slavery, into the present day. His was a fluent and expansive account of how carnival can itself be ‘theory generating’; he advocated for the telling of carnival histories in a mode of discovery, recovery and affirmation. As such, the starting point for Dr Johnson’s presentation was not a seminal text such as that of Bakhtin, nor any other founding treatise on carnival, but was centred rather on discrete instances of carnival practice, which this speaker carefully drew together through an overarching explanation.

Dr Johnson explained the ‘evolution’ of carnival as a means to meet the existing scholarship on Carnival in the world of the imagination and the formal. He signalled clearly that general scholarly interest in carnival’s ability to offer a means of ‘resistance’ has held the unfortunate result of misrecognising (even to the extent of downplaying) the role that power holds in carnival. As Dr Johnson debated, given that power has myriad aspects, our interest in resistance needs to be nested within more complex, ‘problem-based’ approaches to the study of carnival. Thus, a great many further and related historiographic problems present themselves, ranging roughly from the diachronic to the synchronic – an approach that repeats Bakhtin’s own commitment to historical materialism and the philosophy of language. Certainly, diachronic questions issue from a key problem of trying to understand the drivers for the evolution of carnival. Yet they can barely help to explain why the festival has so many faces, quite so many intertwining elements, and so diversifying a character. For this, a synchronic method— albeit mindful of historical change— can offer a direct look at the material components of carnival as they interact in any given situation. Dr Johnson alluded on the suggestion of the world. Dr Johnson alluded on the suggestion of the world. Dr Johnson alluded on the suggestion of the world. Dr Johnson alluded on the suggestion of the world. Dr Johnson alluded on the suggestion of the world.
that carnival is itself a ‘trinity’, or ‘three body problem’, comprising of ‘mas’ (masquerader, pan (group musical compositions played on the steel drum), as well as kaiso and calypso (sung, highly lyrical and improvisational performances). These unfold further, he showed, through a proliferation of components that include costume, oral arts (song and speech), dance, drumming, and weaponry (namely sticks and whips). Almost any instance of carnival will see a combination of these, which morph into one another through interaction and exchange.

Against this background of explanation, Dr Johnson was able to probe the core issue of what has encouraged the individualistic responses of the many participants in carnival; and a concomitant issue of what such responses may enable for those individuals and their national community. For this, we return to a concern with ideas of the collective and practices of identification and identity, in a way that tries to make sense of carnival’s changing and multiple manifestations as a register of power. Although here, in a surprising move away from part-versus-whole/individual-versus-structure explanations, Dr Johnson briefly theorised why it may be that the temporality of carnival could provide the key to understanding its deeper significance. He argued that there has been an over-reliance on the Roman Catholic calendar in trying to explain carnival, i.e. as a pre-Lenten indulgence of the flesh that anticipates a season of abnegation and fasting. In place of that explanation, carnival has to be seen more complexly and in contrast not with Lent but with Christmas: marking a contrast between carnival’s public show of individual self-realisation on the one hand and, on the other, the family-based, domesticised time of celebration that Christmas has largely become. Since the latter has nothing of the liberatory complexion of carnival, this play of stark differences has as much to do with the optics of celebration — aesthetics in the broadest sense—as with the place of those actions and their desired critical effects.

Perhaps more importantly for the symposium as a whole, both Dr Wegner and Dr Johnson argued powerfully that the resulting analytic breakdowns from the Trinidad context may be generalised out of its Caribbean context, without forsaking the radically particular structure of its origins. In discussion, that prompted various questions including the following:

- What is the relationship between academic discourse on carnival and carnival practices themselves? What scope is there for two-way traffic between them?

Chair’s discussion

An abiding debate here is about how to recognise carnival as an effective form of popular resistance, and to query whether this may be taken for granted as a reading of it. Carnival here has been forcefully sanctioned by the nation state ever since Trinidad and Tobago’s political independence. It was colonised even during the high point of the British Empire, such as through commercialisation and direct sponsorship, which brought a system of competition and anti-democratic gestures such as title- and prize-giving for individual performers and carnival bands. Rather than remain caught within this preoccupying dilemma, however, these two speakers had worked to unpack and complicate concepts such as resistance.

My own understanding of Bakhtin’s and all such linguistic-based approaches is that they have to be undergirded by attention to perception – what Rêa de Matas in her doctoral and published work has called ‘sensory embodied experience’. That could mean ‘bracketing’ Bakhtin in the manner of the phenomenological epoché, which involves taking a completely different methodological approach that starts with listening to the participants of carnival and trying to understand the specificity of their experiences. Inquiry could then move on to considering how to unfold those participants’ personally-held explanations and narratives, as well as the meanings for carnival derived through auto-ethnography, etc. Let us be clear, however, that would involve contending with the materiality and emotionality of carnival, areas that Bakhtin does not cover. Clearly the ‘new materialism’ and historical materialism are not interchangeable approaches.

This might all be rather wishful thinking and fanciful reasoning in the area of project design, however, as I will briefly try to explain. What both of the papers by Dr Johnson and Dr Wegner revealed is that there are barriers in the way of any sort of thoroughgoing evaluation of the appropriate theoretical frameworks for understanding Trinidad carnival. That is not to say that carnival is without a tradition of intellectual reflection and theoretical claims. I do not see the Caribbean as having succumbed to a self-impoverished utilitarianism in the way of a rejection of ‘theory’ or anything along those lines. Rather, I would highlight the general discourse of ‘exceptionalism’ that dominates within the English-speaking Caribbean. This is so widespread as to have the effect of making it harder to recognise how a theoretical approach which originates outside the region can have any or much purchase at all. The same attitude may be extended to the identity and location of those who are doing the research; it has not helped the path of academic research on the Caribbean in general, in my view. A commonly made claim is that Trinidadian culture stands apart and that it is opaque to academic study. However, the terms of that difference only tends to return us to already
quite familiar academic categories and concepts (freedom, democracy, individualism, nation, community, difference, change/continuity, etc.). These are long-debated in both academia and in the mainstream humanistic thought, as well as in foundational models of postcolonial criticism.

As I see it, the main imperative for carnival researchers within and without the region is to remain in dialogue. They must retain all the opportunities presented to the academy through connection and comparison. Part of the assumption of Trinidadian and Caribbean ‘exceptionalism’ is a reluctance to undertake theoretical work per se – an intellectual conservatism that tries not only to leave theory aside in local representations but to disenable if not disempower the effects of theoretical work. Any talk of an innovative ‘experiential’ post-Bakhtinian phenomenology of carnival is likely to be ruled out by that attitude. There is a paradox here, given the ample evidence that Trinidad carnival can be ‘theory generating’, as our speakers have clearly shown. As such, we need a compassionate and explanatory look at this context, with the acceptance that knowledge about carnival can take a variety of forms and that ‘ownership’ of that knowledge deserves to be contested.

This returns us to the central objective to consider a ‘new paradigm’ in this panel, where I see a danger of us being in a muddle about how this all sits within a research field. Effusive first-person reflections, historical or otherwise, and enthusiasm for carnival in Trinidad expressed on a nationalistic register (‘we culture’ etc.) are hardly a research method. Those emotions and knowledge are actually more like data, and so need to be allotted a different (and probably much better place?) in this field.

Open Access
© 2022 by Leon Wainwright.

A copy of this article may be downloaded for free from the Journal of Festival Culture Inquiry and Analysis under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)