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Carnival of the Mundane: *Red Oktober* at England's National Tramway Museum

This paper is a consideration of two complementary curiosities: the first is *Red Oktober*, an annual event held at the National Tramway Museum in Crich, Derbyshire which imagines urban Eastern bloc communism in the heart of rural middle England. The second curiosity is Mikhail Bakhtin's paradoxical reflection that the medieval carnival is both irredeemably lost to modern (and post-modern) sensibilities, while he asserts, at the same time, that its 'true festive character is indestructible' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.9). Assessments of the carnivalesque remain divided on its efficacy whether as a space of political liberation or a space of reactionary catharsis. My argument here returns to Bakhtin's understanding of the carnival as critically neither, but an open space whose 'true festive character' is an immersive second-life which he defines as 'hostile to all that was immortalized and completed'.

The *Red Oktober* event is an annual celebration of 'Eastern Bloc vehicles ... built before the fall of the Berlin Wall' (National Tramway Museum, no date). As well as cars and motorbikes, army and emergency vehicles are also on show and on parade. The communist aesthetics of the event extend beyond the vehicles to their owners and volunteer re-enactors who dress as an array of associated 'characters' (drivers, border guards, not-so-secret police) as well as Russian and British soldiers. The on-site pub and café also add to the theme, offering a simple East European menu and serving Germanic beers.

These two eateries - The Red Lion pub and Rita's Tearoom – are indicative of the curiosity of this event as they themselves are permanent exhibits at the museum, and markers of its impressionistic English environment. Such buildings form part of a reconstructed English village, rounded out with an old-fashioned sweet-shop, printing press and ice-cream parlour, as a backdrop to the central exhibit of restored, working trams. Rita's Tearoom consequently observes the décor of a 1950s café, while The Red Lion is a traditional English pub, originally from Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire, that has been dismantled, transported and rebuilt brick-by-brick in the Derbyshire museum.

Bringing both sides of the Iron Curtain together in this way makes the *Red Oktober* event curious on both aesthetic and experiential planes. Before my first visit to the event, I expected the combination of artefacts from historical sites that are ideologically at loggerheads to jar with each other. To see adjacent Wartburgs parked before a red-brick pub, or a trio of Eastern bloc militia emerging from Barnett's Traditional Sweetshop should be riddled with incongruity and clashing aesthetics, yet their integration is surprisingly seamless. This paper proposes that the unifying force blending these distinct artefacts is the indestructible character of the carnivalesque, which opens up a space for political and social renewal by, in Bakhtin's phrase, 'attending the funeral of the past and present' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.81).

The first point of unification, then, may not be intrinsic to the artefacts themselves, but rather the way they are blanketed inside the fundamentally nostalgic experience of the working museum which romanticizes the past inside the present. Yet while nostalgia masks the illusory mode of its reminiscence, the intermingling of communist and capitalist relics at *Red Oktober* posits an openly alternative, imagined history, an explicit fiction which remains, at the same time, affectively nostalgic. By constructing history in this way, the Museum occupies the same simulated yet immersive space as a theme park or film set, built for a drama, yet to be played out, set in a mythical, genteel Anglo-Communist parish.

This artificial but affective synthesis of ideologies within the event recalls the East German political movement Neues Forum. Their concept of the 'third way', proposed in the dying days of the DDR, is described by Slavoj Zizek as 'conceiving the disintegration of the Communist regime as the opening up of a possibility to invent some new form of social space that would reach beyond the confines of capitalism' (Zizek, 2008, p.104-5). By continuing to postulate such a space with the increasing hindsight of advancing global capitalism, *Red Oktober* can be understood as returning to, and sustaining, the open possibilities of 1989 rather than a fictive history, engaging not in nostalgia so much as glasnostalgia.

The ‘possibility to invent some new form of social space’ that unites the Neues Forum agenda with the *Red Oktober* event echoes Bakhtin’s broad formula for medieval carnival in which ‘[f]or a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p.89). In the case of Neues Forum, Zizek identifies their utopianism as ‘nonideological’ in that, while the movement’s own position is distinct, illusory and insubstantial, it nevertheless throws into relief the relatively antagonistic character of late capitalism. Non-ideological here correlates with Bakhtin’s concept of the extrapolitical dimension of the carnival, producing what he terms its ‘second life outside officialdom’ (1984, p.6).

The utopian element of *Red Oktober* is also Zizekian inasmuch as it constitutes a universal realm without its antagonistic element. The artificial-yet-real film set atmosphere functions without the forms of terror associated with communist states: there is no visible Director, and so no pervasive authoritarian presence. This manifests itself in a generally laissez faire attitude, devoid of the ruthless efficiency of the party machine - the only scheduled event of the day is a parade of the assorted vehicles, but ask anyone what time it starts and there is only a vague awareness that it takes place sometime after lunch, and lunch is ongoing. Without a pervasive authoritarian presence, the costumed border guards, police and soldiers do not perform any official role, and so spend the day freely in more mundane pursuits, such as tinkering with the engines of their cars, ambling around amiably and snacking. The film set also lacks cameras, an absence which strips out the peculiar terror of constant, covert surveillance attached to the Eastern bloc. This particular absence *is* pervasive: while everyone’s attention is directed toward the exhibits of the vehicles or Museum’s artefacts, watching each other is experienced as intrusive and disruptive. Even those who are costumed, without any specific role or occasion to re-enact, are resistant to being observed. Two stories here will illustrate: having just entered the museum compound, my partner stopped to take a photograph of the extraordinary village scene with its trams, soldiers, cobbled street and jeeps. A nearby re-enactor, dressed as a border guard, immediately shouted to us in

German that photographs were forbidden - obviously not an actual rule of the event, or within the remit of his role, his spontaneous reaction both performed, and refused, the secrecy of the East German state. Similarly, when we were trying to take a photograph of another re-enactor, dressed as a soldier in Rita's Tearoom, he reacted suspiciously, as if he wasn't dressed conspicuously and so didn't warrant any attention.

Released from the terror of surveillance, visitors and re-enactors at *Red Oktober* are freed to observe another carnivalesque trope, full physical and imaginative immersion in the second-life which, for Bakhtin, 'does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.7). The border guard's reaction above, in his resistance to our photography, also refuses us a space as tourists and locates us instead as participants inside the extrapolitically constructed second-life.

The unifying feature of the archaic form of carnival, drawing everyone into participation, was laughter, which was, in Bakhtin's words, 'as universal as seriousness'. This laughter defined the order of the second life by reversing the essential seriousness of political and ecclesiastical power in the first, official life. He notes that:

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 intimidation. These elements prevailed in the Middle Ages.

(Bakhtin, 1984, p.90)

Given the place that Bakhtin was writing from, it is perhaps not surprising that 'the Middle Ages' can here be replaced with any Eastern bloc regime and the statement still holds, certainly from a conventionally Western and historical perspective. Laughter, on the other hand, 'overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.90). Medieval laughter functioned in this way as the 'social consciousness of all the people', producing the social space in which new possibilities can be opened up. This liberating force of medieval laughter

becomes unavailable, however, once laughter itself is appropriated in the modern period, and used satirically by private individuals.

For Zizek, the liberating power of laughter, if it ever existed, has now transformed into its own opposite. Even back in 1989, he observed that '[i]n contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian...laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously' (1989, p.24). The appropriation of carnivalesque strategies by dominant powers continues to expand by incorporating its foolishness: In *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* Zizek describes Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as 'a kind of Iranian Berlusconi whose mixture of clownish posturing and ruthless power-politics causes unease even among the majority of ayatollahs'. Add George Bush to this duo to complete the Larry, Curly and Mo of international politics, or London Mayor Boris Johnson for an English equivalent. In such a clownish context, the Feast of Fools could only be a weak reflection, rather than a subversive travesty, of the official order.

Krier and Swart argue similarly that under global capitalism, the carnivalesque has become an insubstantial property of the dominant, official order, which they describe as 'flattening carnival forms into mere simulations incapable of producing social solidarity or liberatory experience' (Krier & Swart, 2012, p.164). It is the focus on 'forms' here which is revealing, in its presumption that the carnivalesque is semiotically indivisible from the exuberant dynamics of traditional carnival. Bakhtin's focus on laughter, however, is predominantly a consequence of his literary focus: the shifting ideological use of laughter distances us not from 'the true festive character' of the carnival - which is indestructible - but from the form of carnival as it is reflected by Rabelais. It is possible then that while the form of carnival may itself be subject to renewal and regeneration, its indestructible festive character exists in the subversive plasticity of its form as determined by its underlying principles, such as the extrapolitical or immersive dimensions, making a 'sphere of utopian freedom' still available even in the context of contemporary capitalism.

At the formal level, *Red Oktober* can be read as a carnival in this sense. Laughter, which now belongs properly to the official sphere, is abandoned and only exists in fleeting or intimate moments at the event. One example, again, is the border guard who chastised us for taking photographs: registering our shock at his spontaneous outburst, he immediately stepped away from the character and subverted his own authority through a properly carnivalesque laughter, marking himself as a participant and not performer in the event, and diffusing the terror that was opened up by his outburst. Such a turn to humour is uncharacteristic of the event, however. The guard's use of laughter was not an end in itself, but a means of restoring the fundamentally mundane character of *Red Oktober* existing outside of the performative and terrifying dimensions of contemporary officialdom. It is this mundanity which replaces laughter as the mechanism for the universally immersive and extrapolitical prerequisites of the carnivalesque. In this reversal, the soldiers and border guards are there to ensure that neither performativity nor terror disturb the utopian equilibrium, and as long as this is maintained they are themselves free to immerse in the mundanity of the day. The exhibited vehicles that are the core exhibit of the event are celebrated for their simple design and utilitarian emphasis, a unifying quality that also runs through the sweet shop, the printing press and the secure, convivial atmosphere of the trams. There is no question, or admittance, of designer sophistication, overpowering branding or the relentless distraction of technological advance. Similarly, the Eastern bloc meals on offer in the Red Lion and Rita's Tearoom are simple and hearty stews, without any Michelin pretensions to Cordon Bleu or Gordon Ramsay.

The second life outside officialdom that liberates its participants here is no longer the medieval feast of excess, abundance and exuberance, which are now the masquerading properties of first life capitalism, but a Carnival of the Mundane, a space that retaliates against the dominant powers that have stolen its universal laughter by stealing back their universal seriousness. As such, *Red Oktober* indicates the persistent power of the carnivalesque to trouble hegemony, and maintain a possibility of utopian freedom. This opens the very space in which Zizek, despite his offhand dismissal of the carnivalesque, can find a sympathetic and unifying arena for his message

'You've had your anti-communist fun...time to get serious once again!' (Zizek, 2009, p.157). The final, indestructible quality of the carnivalesque is this ruthless commitment to travesty, prepared even to turn its own most recognisable trait inside out in the pursuit of universal liberation.