

Scrapyard Carnival: A Ritual for Collective Expression

Scrapyard Carnival | Sean Lynch | 07.07-30.07 2016

I

Sean Lynch's new installation *Scrapyard Carnival* centers on an incident that occurred at a scrapyard in Clondalkin in 2011 after the rights to destroy a notorious criminal banker's BMW were bought at an online eBay auction. Lynch attended the event along with press photographers from Bloomberg and a local comedian among others, all on the day of the Irish general election, Friday 25th of February 2011. The aspiring media celebrity comedian danced on the car, crushing it as Irish and Polish flags unfurled at full mast. Lynch has described his fascination with such events in an interview with graphic designer Wayne Daly, 'I'm interested in developing representations of idiosyncratic moments of the past, instances mostly eradicated from popular consciousness that yet exist through a disparate series of objects, events and narratives swaying between the anecdotal and objective-informative.'¹

In the gallery space schematic drawings from the BMW 5 Series manual traverse the gallery space, emitted from rotating slide projectors, overtaking one another and occasionally merging. The internal workings of the engine mechanism seem to migrate, from within the video piece and posters, across the walls and floor. Part of the car – a broken rear tail light – serves as an actual memento from the incident. Within the exhibition there is a suite of posters that evolved from a collaboration with designer Wayne Daly. These abstract compositions act as belated advertisements for the event. The exhibition also incorporates a film that shows the BMW being crushed, transforming the space into an immersive installation creating a disorientating atmosphere whereby visual information competes, subsists and digresses.

Sean Fitzpatrick was chairman of Anglo Irish Bank until 2008 when he resigned amid mounting revelations over hidden loans. The scandal precipitated a collapse of the bank's share price, which in turn led to its nationalisation on 21 January 2009. Fitzpatrick played a major role in bringing about a recession in Ireland through the lending of huge sums of money to property developers and by driving up the value of shares in Anglo Irish Bank after lending to what was termed a 'golden circle' of investors. He has repeatedly refused to acknowledge wrongdoing or to apologise to the Irish people and instead blames a broader economic catastrophe. In an RTÉ Radio 1 interview on The Marian Finucane Show in October 2008 he stated 'the causes of our problems are global, so I can't say sorry with any degree of sincerity and decency. But I can say thank you'. Fitzpatrick, the much-maligned figure of public embezzlement and corruption, has yet to face a jury.

Scrapyard Carnival incorporates mechanisms of power and vulnerability and the imposition of ritualistic acts in an attempt to deal with injustice. Through this contemporary folk ritual Sean Lynch highlights the propensity within society to revert to ritual and metaphor in order

¹ *Positioning the Residual: Sean Lynch in Conversation with Wayne Daly*, A Rocky Road Exhibition Guide, Crawford Art Gallery (2011)

to express collective frustration. This ritualistic device has occurred throughout history. One such example in Irish society is 'the Widow's Curse', a phenomenon that developed during and after the Irish Famine, gathering ground as a means of folk vindication or vengeance. During the 19th century in Ireland, landlords had incredibly disproportionate power over those that lived on their land. The oppressed people that eked out a precarious living had no support or means of rebelling against such tyranny. A widespread belief in the ability of widows to curse essentially represented a form of wishful folk vindication, which often manifested practically, as widows were feared and venerated due to their perceived conjury. It bestowed these women with power as the stories were invested with the collective belief and will of the people. In his essay on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, political theorist Andrew Robinson reviews, and critiques, one of the central concepts in the Russian thinker's work: 'the Carnavalesque' 'curses, parody and debasing are used to subvert the stabilising tendencies of dominant speech-genres. Today's swearing retains only the remainders of this culture, since it keeps only the destructive and not the reproductive elements. Still, its continuing attraction shows that it carries the remnants of the energy of folk culture and carnival'²

'The Carnavalesque', as described by Bakhtin, constitutes a specific place and time allocated to the collective questioning around the structuring of society. Role reversal within different strata of society was common during 'the carnival' and the events were used cathartically as a way to pose questions without repercussions. It constituted a means of acting out role reversals and testing ideas experientially rather than hypothetically, 'man experiences this flow of time in the festive marketplace, in the carnival crowd, as he comes into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste. He is aware of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people. This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts'.³

II

'Dancing fever' or 'dancing mania' was a type of social behavior that swept through Europe between the 13th and 17th centuries. Those afflicted danced until they collapsed from exhaustion, injury or dehydration. Classified by physicians of the time as 'Tarantism' and described later by historian Henry Sigerist in an account:

People, asleep or awake, would suddenly jump up, feeling an acute pain like the sting of a bee. Some saw the spider, others did not, but they knew that it must be the tarantula. They ran out of the house into the street, to the market place dancing in great excitement. Soon they were joined by others who like them had been bitten, or by people who had been stung in previous years, for the disease was never quite cured. The poison remained in the body and was reactivated every year by the heat of summer... Music and dancing were the only effective remedies, and people were known to have died within an hour or in a few days because music was not available.⁴

² *Outbreak! The Encyclopedia of Extraordinary Social Behavior*, Evans, Hilary and Bartholomew, Robert E (2009)

³ *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich (1984)

⁴ *Outbreak! The Encyclopedia of Extraordinary Social Behavior*, Evans, Hilary and Bartholomew, Robert E (2009)

Theories that the condition was provoked by a spider bite or by hot summers have since been undermined. Various accounts describe differing behaviors and historians posit contradictory speculations, but the overarching consensus is that tarantism was a kind of mass psychosis that was willed on by the individual, consciously or subconsciously, to cope with restrictions or injustice in society. Medical historian George Rosen suggested that ‘it may have been a form of covert political activity, providing an outlet for expressing local heathen customs – in this instance a ritual composed mostly of persons suffering from neurosis, insanity, and depression that slowly evolved into the conscious or subconscious guise of being instigated by spider bites, so as to coexist and even thrive, despite the ascendancy of Christianity’ (Evans, Hilary and Bartholomew, Robert E). During their affliction, it was common for victims to digress from socially acceptable behavior and they were able to carry out ‘a variety of prohibited acts with impunity, claiming they had been under the influence of tarantism’.⁵

Interestingly, traces of the outbreak still exist in various parts of Europe today. In south-west Donegal *The Tarantella* is part of the traditional repertoire of fiddle music, having arrived with an Italian sailor who stayed in Glencolmcille after a ship wreck stranded him there in the early 19th Century.

III

Hélène Cixous, in her book *The Newly Born Woman* noted that such widespread affliction among a specific demographic expresses a fantasy of human relation, ‘the mythology of the celebration contains the inversion of daily life in its development: feast, binge, drunkenness, dissolute ingestion of food and regurgitation all demonstrate that it is not simply a matter of getting unusual pleasures but of pushing them to their very limit (Cixous, Hélène). This supports the idea that perhaps tarantism is an extension or subsidiary of ‘the carnivalesque’. The ‘carnival’ has always provided a means of catharsis as well as wishful thinking, or utopian projection. Claude Lévi-Strauss believed that ‘the celebrations play out the reverse side of social life, not because it was ever like that, but because it never was and will never be able to be otherwise. The characters of the past have no value as explanation except insofar as they coincide with the characters of the future and present’.⁶

Throughout *Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power*, Andrew Robinson notes a certain consensus among political thinkers that such a principle, ‘is a kind of safety-valve through which people let off steam. It ultimately sustains and is functional for the dominant system. It might even reinforce dominant values by contrasting them with their opposites’.⁷ Robinson has also highlighted the counter argument to this point stating that ‘if this were the case, the powerful would be more sympathetic to carnival than was actually the case. Also, carnivals did, in fact, sometimes pass over into rebellion. And rebellions often used symbolism borrowed from carnival.’⁸ The carnival in this regard has the capacity to

⁵ (*Outbreak! The Encyclopedia of Extraordinary Social Behavior*, Evans, Hilary and Bartholomew, Robert E (2009)

⁶ *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Beacon Press, Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1969)

⁷ *In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power*, Robinson, Andrew Ibid

⁸ Ibid

both express malcontent by generating an environment where it is safe to address societies failings and collectively project solutions, to experiment with various forms of social order or disorder without ramifications, and thus to exact real change through utopian projection.

Within *Scrapyard Carnival*, Sean Lynch encourages the application of these modes of thinking to contemporary living. He has identified carnivalesque attributes in the ritualistic destruction of Sean Fitzpatrick's series 5 BMW and throughout the installation he presents the scrapyard as a site of transgression and inversion - a forum for collective expression with the potential for rebellion.

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