Bakhtin and Popular Culture

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Heteroglossal Novelization

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN is acknowledged in increasingly wide circles as a sensitive observer of popular culture in its sociohistorical context. His acute study of the folkloric rituals of carnival—from the phallophors of epic Saturnalia, whose role was to joke and cavort obscenely, to the rogue comedians at turn-of-the-century country fairs—uncover a vast and fertile dialogue of heteroglossia.1 Not only at the carnival but pervading all levels of language, Bakhtin identifies infinitely shifting heteroglossal strata made up of loosely bound generic wholes, subgeneric wholes, accents, systems, dialects, and constantly fragmented layers of language working together, or at battle, or at play. This dialogic scheme covers, in The Dialogic Imagination and Rabelais and His World, most epic drama and Russian and European nineteenth-century realist literature and invites its own extension into areas of recent Western popular culture.

Although Bakhtin insists that the novel is the key form of the time, his advantage over everyone else working on novel theory is his appreciation that the novel, rather than assimilating its language to form, shapes its form to languages and consequently appears as what Michael Holquist describes as a “supergenre,” ingesting and engulfing all other genres. Therefore the range of texts composed of a series of different languages interpenetrating one another—Bakhtin’s classification of “novelness”—must clearly be immense. In fact, rather than limiting the term novel to a narrow definition of a piece of textual fiction, Bakhtin uses it to name the interplay of heteroglossal strata at work within any given literary system in order to reveal the artificial limits and constraints of that system; for “novelization” as Bakhtin sees it is fundamentally opposed to the ordering into genres and canons that is characteristic of most literary systems.

Bakhtin’s version of novelization does not permit generic monologue, but rather insists on an interplay of dialogues between what any given system will admit as literature, or “high culture,” or art,
or “good writing,” and on the other hand all those texts excluded from these definitions as nonliterature, “low culture,” popular culture, or subculture. All writing features this interplay, and therefore all kinds of language, even those which might not be classed as “higher literary forms” by the traditional critic, such as musical lyrics or advertisement logos, to Bakhtin represent important forms of novelization. That piece of textual fiction more conventionally described as the “novel” is merely the most refined and distilled version of this definition, which spills over into other kinds of texts and novels in other times. As Bakhtin himself writes in The Dialogic Imagination, “texts continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation. . . . they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth.”

Bakhtinian analysis of the novel represents then a theoretical system to which it is not only possible but critically essential to submit today’s magazines, comedy, advertisements, popular music, art, and fashion, since in their continual interchange and deliberate fusion of high and low styles, politics, parody and pastiche, comic strip and literature, haute couture and street fashion, they constitute a singular shifting dialogism whose rich carnival of discourse lies open to Bakhtin’s radical definition of “novelness,” and their instances of language, say in rock lyrics or advertisements, are in this way very similar to the instances of language that Bakhtin finds in the novel.

Bakhtin and Genre

It is vital however to realize that, according to Bakhtin, in any analysis of the social ideology of genres such as “high” and “low” styles, “politics,” “parody,” “pastiche,” and so on, it is impossible to escape the fact that the author/artist/designer is Russian or Polish, Jewish or Catholic, male or female, old or young, formally educated or formally uneducated, and so on. Bakhtin finds it difficult to identify specific genres beyond “relatively stable forms of construction of the whole” in every discourse and utterance, from the literary and the rhetorical to the spontaneous and the everyday—hence his theory of “sociopolitical genre,” or “generic wholes.” Real “genres” as such do not actually exist; rather, they play at being all-encompassing and “total.” Consequently, the very notion of a “unity” is false, since that supposed “unity” encompasses infinite strata of other, autonomous unities. Absolute, ideal extremes are illusory—it is possible
to theorize and quantify only, according to Bakhtin, in terms of approximate "wholes" and the generalization of generic regularities.

Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia rests upon his vision of language not as a static, communicable representation of the speaker's intention but as a system bearing the weight of centuries of intention, motivation, and implication. Language can never be molded into working for the speaker's unique purpose but can only be handed back and forth like printed books borrowed from a lending library. Since it is already composed of weighted uses, grammatical rules, and agreed conventional lexis, Bakhtin sees all language as negating the uniqueness of personal experience, and with it any possibility of maintaining a connection with value and intention, as does Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*: "the 'meaning' of my expressions always escapes me. I never know if I signify what I wish to signify. . . . As soon as I express myself, I can only guess at the meaning of what I express—i.e. the meaning of what I am."3

Within every single word, within every single utterance, Bakhtin identifies a large and ancient collection of ideas, motives, and intentions utilized by centuries of speakers and writers. All language, according to Bakhtin, is prestratified into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, languages of generations and age-groups, tendentious languages, languages of authority, and, especially in recent media language, the discourse of various circles and passing fashions of the day, even of the hour.4

Bakhtin finds himself unable to describe social forms and conventions (what most critics today would define as "genres") without reducing them to the obviously individualistic category of voices, and equally unable to imagine consistent dialogue among similar genres, or among works within a genre, except as a kind of loose, multiform "whole." Bakhtin reserves the term genre for obvious, widely accepted generic structures—epic, myth, poetry, or the space-time structures of youth, age, the beginning, the end, and so on. Essentially, genre in Bakhtin is something of a nonce-word. He seems ultimately to suggest that it is possible—indeed, necessary—to reduce all forms, narratives, structures, and so on, to their own "ideological languages." Nevertheless, he keeps the terms genre and generic wholes to identify and theorize widely accepted forms, partly in order to enable reference to wider literary and narrative traditions than his consistent return to sociological and ideological theory would generate.

But as Ken Hirschkop points out, even the meanings of words like dialogism and carnival are "a sedimentation of past uses, current and past social conflicts, the changing forms of ideological life; in
short, these terms are themselves dialogical."5 Yet this does not mean that the schema at play in even the most basic language-unit are too densely interwoven ever to comprehend: "Such is the fleeting language of a day, of an epoch, a social group, a genre, a school and so forth," writes Bakhtin, that "[i]t is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of . . . embattled tendencies in the life of language" (DN 272).

Style Magazines

In recent popular culture, nowhere is the influence of heteroglossia more obvious and immediate than in so-called style magazines like Arena, i.d., and The Face. Arena is a fairly new magazine, on sale mainly in England, the United States, Germany, and Italy, published and edited in England by Nick Logan, and specializing in "exclusive" interviews with film and rock stars, upmarket articles on sport and fashion, and pieces on politics and architecture. The market for Q has similar international aspirations; this is also a relatively new publication which aims to be "the modern guide to music and more," focusing mainly on rock interviews and reviews. i.d. has been around for rather longer; it is marketed over most of Europe as well as the United States, Japan, and Australia but focuses mainly on British music, fashion, film, television, and so on.

Such forms of what Bakhtin would class as heteroglottal novelization consistently obliterate the distinctions, on the written page and, it is suggested, in youth society, between high-artistic-noncommercial and mass-pop-consumerist, between street and Parisian fashions, art and advertising, pop and nonpop, poetry and lyrics, comic-strip and literature, the marginal and the mainstream. It is impossible to tell fashion shots from advertisement photographs, virtually impossible to distinguish between articles and commercials. The prose is a fusion of colloquial Americanisms, technical jargon, black street rap, quasi-academic analysis, and fashionable puns. In this extract from The Face, Jim McClellan reviews a Percy Adlon film, Rosalie Goes Shopping:

A comic fantasy about the consumer credit trap and the personal computer, it stars Marianne Sagebrecht as a German housewife . . . determined to live life the shop-till-you-drop postmodern American way. Hubbie Brad Davis’s wages can’t even pay the interest on all those afternoons at the mall, so she starts double-dealing with a vast deck of credit cards and
number-crunching on her personal computer. Trouble is, her crimes don’t feel wrong. Rosalie ends up nearly saying something about the hyperconformist consumer and the double standards of the debt economy. Pity about the soundtrack, though.6

Here the dialogue consists of a fusion of British middle-class colloquialisms (“Hubbie”) and ellipsis (“Pity about . . .”), fairly respectable economic textbook language (“the consumer credit trap,” “the double standards of the debt economy”), the language of nontabloid, ostensibly apolitical British journalism (“A comic fantasy, it stars Marianne Sagebrecht as a German housewife”), tabloid language (“shop-till-you-drop”), American language—or, at least, the Americanisms commonly used by British journalists (“Trouble is . . .,” “number-crunching”) and a parody of current critical sociological and literary discourse (“postmodern American way,” “the hyperconformist consumer”).7

Each stratification of discourse inevitably incorporates various motives, leanings, intentions—unconscious, prereflective ideologies that are often defined as political. Bakhtin himself, in a string of dialogues from 1934 onwards, moves on to define dialogism as “the unmasking of social languages” (I 11). So while Jim McClellan’s film review—as a form of heteroglotal “novelization”—constitutes an interweaving of leftist economics, anticapitalism, anticonsumerism, fashionable British anti-Americanism (although the utilization of American colloquialisms suggests, on another level, a certain subcurrent of pro-American sentiment), what these strata most clearly convey is the discourse of the white, Western, middle-class, male, formally educated intellectual. Hirschkop develops this idea of conflicting ideologies into straight political tendencies: “If each language is a voice, then society is a welter of intersecting groups and different ideologies, more or less the version of society on offer from liberalism. And yet things are in a way even worse than that. For each point of view is described as an interested point of view: it embodies not just a perspective but a set of values or desires” (I 20).

By an interested point of view, however, it seems more likely that Bakhtin is suggesting a subconscious, preexistent, unthinking ideological worldview rather than the active political aims Hirschkop suggests in his use of evaluative terms like worse. In “Discourse in the Novel,” a similar point is made: “all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (DN 291–92).
The main point about heteroglossia is that all language has a sideways glance, and yet in Jim McClellan’s film review, the sideways glance seems to be partly directed at itself. This kind of language is self-referential, self-regarding—aware, in a way, of its own shifting dialogism. The result of this self-parody, which in youth style magazines such as the self-confessedly superficial The Face seems almost inevitable, is that the language loses much of its primary intention (here, the film review) and develops instead into a game of words, a kind of linguistic solitaire. This is the kind of discourse that “lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse [napravlennost] toward the object” (DN 292). Ann Jefferson writes: “Looking (at yourself) while you leap is a highly dangerous thing to do, and on the figurative plain the effects of such self-regarding attitudes can be just as devastating, because they empty acts of their substance and purpose, and action is, significantly, turned into play or gesture.”

Popular Culture and Carnival

This kind of ironic, self-reflecting parody of the dialogism inherent in language is often the style of the traditional fool, who mocks others’ uses of words by using them himself. Shakespeare’s Fool in King Lear, for example, is introduced into the text partly for purposes of “making strange” (ostranenie) the world of conventional pathos by making Lear’s dramatic, aristocratic language of suffering seem distant and unreal when it is cited beside similar meanings couched in the Fool’s own folkloric, nursery riddles.

And this is precisely the relation between dialogism—both lived and textual—and the Bakhtinian notion of carnival. Carnival is the time when all social groups and classes join together in a wild Saturnalian celebration, which involves the fusion of each group’s dialogical stratum into a parodic, ironic festival of language. According to Bakhtin, each level of heteroglossia is linked to the next by a common folkloric laughter, whose roots go back deep into preclass folklore and which destroys traditional connections and abolishes idealized strata, bringing out the crude, unmediated links between words and concepts that are normally kept very separate. Carnival, according to Bakhtin, represents “the disunification of what has traditionally been linked, and the bringing together of that which has been traditionally kept distant and disunified.” Carnival, in the written text as well as in lived language, brings the everyday into sacred life in the form of ritualistic violations (skvernoslovie), causing ritualistic laughter and clownishness. The slave and
jester become substitutes for the ruler and god, various forms of ritualistic parody make their appearance, and “the passions” are mixed with laughter and gaiety. Bakhtinian carnival cavalierly suppresses hierarchies and distinctions, “recalling us to a common creatureliness.”

So just as the court jester’s ironic repetition of common language estranges that language and alienates it, so at the carnival does the riotous confusion of all varieties of discourse, both high and low, make strange the similar level of dialogism preexistent in language. Opposed to all those who are well-to-do in life, suggests Bakhtin, comes the language of the merry rogue—street songs, folksayings, anecdotes, a lively parody of the words of poets, scholars, monks, knights, and others. Like the interplay of genres and levels within the prose of popular style magazines such as The Face, the language of the merry rogue parodically reprocesses other people’s discourse, but always in such a way as to rob them of their power, to “distance them from the mouth,” as it were, by means of a roguish deception, to mock their language and thus turn what was direct discourse into light self-parody. “Falsehood is illuminated by ironic consciousness and in the mouth of the happy rogue parodies itself” (DN 402).

“Permanent” Carnivalization

In this respect, much of recent popular culture appears as “permanent” carnivalization (though “permanent” in the sense of “permanently” ephemeral, constantly changing). Style magazines consistently offer a wide range of interweaving discourses, languages, ontologies, and dialogues characteristic of the anticanonism Bakhtin defines as essential to the language of novelization, and the festival of heteroglossia that results is not a mere sideshow at a traveling carnival, but a “permanently” ephemeral, playful, self-referential, self-parodying component of postmodern popular culture. Bakhtin’s idea of carnival, both lived and textual, as the self-regarding parody of different language styles and levels of dialogue, and his description of the stock-in-trade carnival jester who has to be able to mimic “birds and animals, . . . the speech, facial expressions and gesticulation of a slave, a peasant, a procurer, a scholastic pedant and a foreigner,” are still relevant to mass culture’s current and continuous taste for impersonation and parody, as testified by the viewing figures for stand-up comics keen on topical political subject matter (like most of the comics at last year’s Edinburgh Festival), and the
popularity of the political caricatures on television programs like “Spitting Image.”

Carnival and Political Conflicts

Yet it would be unwise to empty Bakhtin’s carnival theory of its political conflict—to reduce it to an eclectic blend of styles and languages, to see it as conflation rather than contention, as generalized indifference rather than the clash of highly interested standpoints. There is also much of the merry rogue in a number of popular musicians, notably in the punk movement where ritualistic violation and cultic indecency are all part of the act. Like the carnival jester, Lords of Misrule like Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious celebrated a thoughtless deceit opposed to everything that is conventional and false—synthetic forms for the parodied exposure of others. As the harbinger of carnival, the punk, like the clown, is granted “the right not to understand, the right to confuse . . . the right to parody others while talking, the right not to be taken literally . . . the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage” (FT 163).

In popular style magazines, this notion of the carnivalesque manifests itself as parody, pastiche, or irony (“that which cannot be put in words without betraying itself” [1 33])—a type of folkloric laughter which, Bakhtin believes, works to bring “official,” “sacred” things (politics, religion, business—although such areas can be separated only insofar as Bakhtin’s theory of generic wholes will permit, since all borders, according to Bakhtin, have already been crossed and no “zone” is ever separate) to a place of maximal proximity where they can be turned inside out and closely examined from all angles. In The Face and i.d., in fact, all representatives of the established canonical literary system and the old, official, sacred world (the royal family, politicians, businessmen, the upper classes, well-established media figures) are treated as absurd and ridiculous and laughed down in favor of the latest top model, alternative comedian, or cult musician, kings and queens for an issue precisely because of their hip, chic ephemerality (look at The Face’s occasional features on the latest independent bands such as Ride or Lush—spotlighted usually because their refusal to sign up to any major record label virtually guarantees their status as flash-in-the-pan, up-to-the-minute underground fads, never likely to become mainstream acts).

At other times, this carnivalesque impulse will take the form of
a mockery of academic prose and criticism. In such cases, the language of the author strives to overcome “literariness” and to get away from outmoded styles and period-bound language by fusing this very “literariness” with folk language and, creating a dialogue between the canonical literary system and the generic languages of various subcultures in what is defined by Bakhtin as heteroglotting novelization, thus making the language parody itself.

One important function of this spirited, self-conscious dialogism is to reduce all false sublimations back to their earthy, earthly roots. As in Menippean satire, the cruder, more bawdy, brawling, more obviously mocking forms of carnival bring everything down to a single level—like the wave of new American comedians epitomized by Andrew Dice Clay, whose “Comedy of Hate” consists in ritualistic abuse of audience members. Bakhtin points out that laughter is associated with folklore and the gross realities of life, possessing the capacity to strip the object of the false verbal and ideological husk that encloses it (see FT 158–224)—a carnivalesque performance which realizes the theories of the textual and linguistic carnivalesque (embodied by, say, the style magazine).

Here it is important to distinguish between carnival as a vast mélange of styles, which lends itself well enough to postmodernism, and carnival as political animus. In other words, to graft Bakhtinian carnival onto postmodern culture without reservation brings the latter out as rather more subversive than much of it actually is. This second kind of political carnivalesque destroys epic distance and restores a “dynamic authenticity” to man, allowing participants to investigate themselves freely, to study the disparity between their potential and their reality, in the text as well as on the street. Bakhtin talks about the performances of obscenely cavorting phallopors in religious processions, and deikilists (mimers) who both travestied national and local myths and mimicked the characteristically typical “languages” and speech mannerisms of foreign doctors, procurers, heterae, peasants, slaves, scholars, judges, and so on (see FPN 41–83).

Bakhtin and Punk

The Sex Pistols sing about “bodies” and one of their slogans declares “Fuck Forever.” In fact, much of the punk movement’s motivation centered around an impulse to disgust and appall by reducing the sublimations of serious artists and musicians to a celebration of what Bakhtin in “Forms of Time and Chronotope in
the Novel” describes as the “series of the human body” (FT 170) (a space-time which, for Bakhtin, seems to replace conventional definitions of “genre”—in other words, an unbound “generic whole”)—vomiting (the food series), wearing dustbin-liners held together with safety-pins (the human clothing series), “getting pissed” to “destroy” (the drink and drunkenness series), fucking forever (sexual series), sporting “Sid Lives” T-shirts (death series). “The pleasures of carnival,” writes Ken Hirschkop, “are not the pleasures of mere talk but those of a discourse that has rediscovered its connection to the concrete” (I 35)—thus, again, the fusion of textual carnivalesque with the carnivalesque in performance to form the heteroglot id “novelization” of texts and forms of language more usually excluded from the literary system.

Much of this political kind of carnivalization, of course, revolves around the destruction of images sacred in other, different, often opposing cultural levels and dialogues. Just as magazine and television advertisements through a process of ritual disembowelment use celebrated and highly revered pieces of music (popular or classical) and images (old masters, pieces of “high” art, and highly paid popular musicians and media figures) for what is considered to be the trivial process of selling, things held sacred in one language or discourse are inevitably parodied in another. Much of the Sex Pistols material is sacrilegious to other dialogues—their lyrics make parody out of the monarchy (“God Save the Queen”), the government (“Anarchy in the U.K.”), the human body (“Bodies”), multinational corporations (“EMI”), and the holocaust (“Belsen was a Gas”). Malcolm McLaren’s sale of “Sid Lives” T-shirts only a couple of weeks after Vicious’s overdose smacks a great deal of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque version of death, which he applies particularly to Rabelaisian burlesque (“in . . . the grotesque [clownish] portrayal of death, the image of death itself takes on humorous aspects: death is inseparable from laughter” [FT 196]). Bakhtin’s celebration of carnival is perhaps too undifferentiating, since (as some critics have pointed out) carnival actually involved a lot of violence and machismo.

That once-taboo topics like sex and death can be treated with such hilarity during the carnival is a signifier not just of the carnivalesque reduction of all cultural sublimations to their folkloric roots, but—even further—the desecration of all that a culture considers “sacred” or meaningful to nothing more than another of the merry rogue’s clownish jests. Everything that has been built up to have significance and moment for mankind is rendered absurd: there is an emphasis in the carnivalesque on the healthy failure of the fool (the “man of the people”) to understand accepted conven-
tions and falsehoods (religion, the government, education, capitalism, advertising, even the pretensions of the music industry itself)—which exposes them for what they are. Here, again, there is little difference between textual and lived carnivalesque. The carnivalesque of this textual heteroglossia—the fusion of canonical and noncanonical literary and subliterary systems—is embodied in the performance of “real life.” The punk and the skinhead “estrange” the discourse of mass-appeal, major-label, commercialized chart music by means of an uncomprehending stupidity (simplicity, naivety)—where the very aspect of not understanding, not grasping the conventions of a society, not comprehending lofty, meaning-charged lyrics, chords, words, labels, things, and events—remains vital.

Pretty Vacant

But the key to popular culture today lies in the aesthetic (or, often, anti-aesthetic) avowal of superficiality, of vacancy, of as little meaning as possible. Texts like the magazine The Face, its very title heralding an uncompromising superficiality, are temples to ephemera, to the garish colors and images of a transient, drifting pop life. These magazines, like many television and cinema commercials, are not meant to be read or studied closely, but to be “cruised” through,¹³ looked at fleetingly with a vague sense of admiration and temptation, the same way you would look at a shop window or an advertisement offering seductive, brightly colored consumer goods in a plastic carnival where, like Rosalie in Rosalie Goes Shopping, you become a “hyperconformist consumer” in the “shop-till-you-drop postmodern American way” when “there is nowhere left to go but to the shops.”¹⁴

These forms of carnivalesque and examples of heteroglottal novelization in text (magazine, soap opera, pulp novel) as well as in reality (game show, rock concert, shopping spree) are characterized by a self-evident failure to “stand up” to philosophical literary theories, but of value for their capacity for “breaking down” into infinite layers of dialogical strata to reveal the limits and constraints of such definitions which restrict, for example, a variety of heteroglottal novelization from inclusion in a traditionally narrow literary canon. Like the anti-academic, anti-serious, anti-intelligent Saturnalian humor of the punk movement and its music, the popular postmodern text is joyously aware of the inadequacies of its own language. In its gleeful celebration of pop art, pop journalism, pop advertising, pop cinema, pop literature, pop feminism, and pop
shopping, every dialogue in the style magazine is a joke at the expense of its own irrelevance, its own unimportance, its own meaninglessness, its own ephemerality.

Heteroglotal dialogues and systems of “novelness” like The Face recognize the emptiness of society, the plasticity of consumerism and, like the Sex Pistols singing about their own vacancy (“Pretty Vacant”) or their manager Malcolm McLaren making a film entitled The Great Rock and Roll Swindle (and, incidentally, profiting financially from his rebellion), resolve that there is nothing left to do but to celebrate that very vacancy, to go shopping. Terry Eagleton points out that Bakhtin fails to stress the politically limited nature of carnival, which is after all licensed misrule, a contained and officially sanctioned rebellion, after which everything returns to normal.15

Comic-ironic Counterparts

Yet for Bakhtin, this ambivalent image of wise ignorance brings to mind the self-praise of the Socratic dialogue (“I am wiser than everyone, because I know that I know nothing”), and the image of Socrates (“a wise man of the most elevated sort,” “wearing the popular mask of a bewildered fool [almost a Margit]”).16 There is no sort of direct discourse, suggests Bakhtin—artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, everyday (“styles” rather than “genres”; Bakhtin describes the novel as a “stylistics of genre” and can never reconcile the idea of genre with the idea of style, redeeming genre as a term for describing “finished and resolved wholes” and style as designating the syntactic and lexical patterns of identifiable social voices)—that doesn’t have “its own parodying and travestying double, its own comic-ironic contre-partie” (FPN 53).

In this light, popular culture appears as the reverse of “high” culture, its alter ego, where all pretensions to meaning, relevance, and aesthetic value are travestied by a parodic, mocking dialogue of vacancy, anti-aestheticism and plasticity. In “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” Bakhtin observes that the most wise and revered figures in epic have their comic counterparts, and become themselves comic: “Odysseus ... donned a clown’s fool’s cap (pileus) and harnessed his horse and ox to a plow, pretending to be mad in order to avoid participation in the war. ... Hercules, who had conquered death in battle ... descended into the nether world [to become] the monstrous glutton, the playboy, the drunk and scrapper, but especially Hercules the madman” (FPN 54).

Popular culture, then—where pop art, music, fashion, and li-
erature all parody their more serious counterparts and where mon-
archs and political leaders are mocked by figures like Johnny Rotten,
the Lord of Misrule—becomes what Bakhtin describes as the Holiday
of Fools or "festa stultorum, a form of ludus in which everything is
reversed, even clothing; trousers were worn on the head, for instance,
an operation that symbolically reflects in some measure the jongleurs,
who are depicted in miniatures head-downward" (FPN 72): a dia-
logue between what the given system will admit into its canons, and
what it systematically rejects—forms of language embraced by Bak-
htin in his universal definition of heteroglotal novelization.

Everything serious has to have a comic double, in text and in
reality. Just as in the Saturnalia the clown is the double of the ruler,
the slave the double of the master, similar comic doubles exist in
all forms of literature and culture. And the funhouse of popular
images, pictures, commercials, music, art, and literature displayed
in current style magazines as in current popular culture represents,
in the same way that the Lord of Misrule doubles the king, the
parodic, self-referential, carnivalesque counterpart to all forms of
"high" culture.

Carnival and Madness

Perhaps neither phenomenon—carnival nor popular culture—is
as unqualifiedly positive as it seems to be, since this systemic reversal
or inversion figured by the carnivalesque can equally be interpreted
as madness. There is a constant similarity between the polyglossia
of the carnival, textual and nontextual, and the manifold layers and
levels of discourse within the madman’s psychological dialogism.
Clair Wills, in her feminist interpretation of carnival, draws a parallel
between the carnival itself, which disrupts by juxtaposing public
indecency with official order, and women’s texts considered hyster-
ical even by avant-garde writers such as Julia Kristeva. Wills charts a
connection between carnival, which fuses common and official types
of discourse as well as many others in a polyglossia, and the hysteric’s
reliving of past history, family situations, and so on, in the present:
"her capacity for turning things ‘upside-down’ is contained within
the family. The . . . ‘transgressive’ nature of popular festive forms
and hysterical discourse are connected not only in their similar
relation to history, but also in their content. . . . Freud’s descriptions
of the hysteric call on popular festive imagery: ‘it is striking how
the broken fragments of carnival, terrifying and disconnected, glide
through the discourse of the hysteric.’ "

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This kind of hysteria—a form of Bakhtin’s heteroglottal novelization in its anticanonical dialogue between what the given system admits as the language of “literature” and what it rejects as subculture—manifests itself not only in the fusion of retrospective and up-to-the-minute language in style magazines and in popular culture in particular but, more clearly perhaps, in the continuous, repetitive, confused stream of discourse that comes from the radio deejay or rap artist. Wills views the discourse of the hysteric as “an attempt to open up the protests of the women of the past by seeing their similarity with the feminist protest of the present” (149), just as Bakhtinian carnival brings together the crises of the past and present. “The crises of the past,” write Wills, “live on in a separate area of the psyche like the last vestiges of a small-town market-place carnival” (136). In The Newly Born Woman, Catherine Clément cites Marcel Mauss to describe people with a “dangerous symbiotic mobility” as afflicted with what she calls “madness, anomaly, perversion”—people whom Mauss labels “neurotics, ecstatics, outsiders, carnies, drifters, jugglers, acrobats.”

This interpretation of carnival as insanity—where the fusing strands of each type of heteroglottal discourse represent the madman’s reliving of past events, emotions, lives, and dialogues—bodes ill for recent popular culture. If the textual and nontextual heteroglossia of elements of today’s popular cultural “novelness” and dialogues—television comedians, comedy shows, pop art, advertisements, films, and most of all magazines—is symptomatic of a carnivalesque madness, then that madness is accepted all over the Western world as popular culture. If the interplay between official, unofficial, academic, nonacademic, popular, parodic, journalistic, artistic, vulgar, colloquial, and plenty of other forms of textual and nontexual discourse is to be interpreted as symptomatic of the hysteric’s revertive, transgressive reliving of past and other dialogues, then the hystera of popular culture is a part of everyday life. The furthest extent of this argument is perhaps best illustrated by the current debate over “fiction factory” television, where fake footage and false news reports have been aired as real news. In one instance, ABC staff members acted out a news story about a spy’s alleged dealings with Soviet agents, but “forgot” to label the footage as a recreation. There is no distinction to be made any more between irony, pastiche, and fiction, on the one hand, and, on the other, the reality it imitates and mocks.
Popular Cultural Chronotopes

An article on the resurgent popularity of the T-shirt in The Face is accompanied by "artistic" photos of vague-looking models—and, a few pages later, a nine-page photographic fashion supplement features similar images of slightly puzzled, slightly aloof "art" characters. The models chosen are always young and beautiful, the writers affect a youthful idiom, the pop music featured is aimed at the young, and played by young musicians. The films and books reviewed are the latest hip releases, the outlandish clothes modeled could be worn only by the young, the advertisements (for new bank accounts, cosmetics, sound systems and stereos, cigarettes, drink, clothes, other style magazines) and notices (of forthcoming concerts, shows, new clubs, discos) are all aimed at an audience under thirty. The Face seems permanently suspended in its own dream of youth-time, where the interests and concerns of older and less chic generations (marriage, the family, jobs, health, finances, the home) are featured only parodically, as subjects for comedy, and are otherwise dismissed as of interest only to the readers of other, outmoded magazines like Cosmopolitan or Vogue.

This permanent existence in a vacuum of youth-time resembles a kind of generic whole which Bakhtin in his studies on the novel refers to as the chronotope (space-time: according to Bakhtin every entry into the sphere of meaning is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope). In the novel, the chronotope can take a variety of forms—Bakhtin mentions chronotopes of the road, the threshold, the castle, the family idyll. The Face figures an eternal chronotope of youth, of youth adventure, the folkloric conception of the idealized beginning, youth idyll with its magic costumes and accoutrements—cosmetics, fashionable clothes, pop music, certain brands of cigarettes, and so on. The youth idyll presented by The Face is a characteristic of folkloric time charted against the background of the reader's own, contemporary perception of time. Bakhtin points out in "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" that our understanding of folkloric time is not a fact of primitive man's consciousness, but rather something that must be adduced from a study of objective material, since the chronotope is what determines the unity of every motif and idea in a text, as well as determining the logic by which these images unfold. The chronotope, then, is artificial—the youth idyll of the style magazine, for example, exhibits no teenage suicide, no young people who are not beautiful, no young classical artists or musicians, no youthful depression or
psychological breakdown except when angst and neurosis are chic.

This filtering of moments in chronotope, Hirschkop believes, takes place not because all authors are necessarily prejudiced, but because "they must approach the object language with some task, project, or aim in mind if speech is to exhibit its ideological structure" (I 23). The reasoning behind each motif of youth chronotope selected for a style magazine article, pop song, or advertisement, then, is connected to the capitalist nature of the market in which these texts are sold and the fact that they are almost universally produced as commercial, consumerist, money-making commodities.

Text and Reality

And this is where any application of Bakhtinian analysis of the carnivalesque to textual practices encounters a stumbling block. So far in this essay I have been referring to carnivalesque practices in text and in reality as realizing similar effects. However, the textual carnival can never completely realize the dialogical struggle current in the social carnival. Although their effects and implications may be similar, it will never be possible completely to align the carnivalesque in text and the carnivalesque in performance, unless the solitary activity of reading is regarded as a kind of performance.

However joyous and festive they may appear, commodities of the textual carnivalesque—those artifacts which emphasize words and language rather than being and doing: the pop song, the advertisement, the magazine, the comic—are still no more than static studies, inevitably far distanced from the active, nontextual, participatory reality of being and doing which they attempt to achieve in print or on the screen. There is a vast difference between the text which promotes the carnivalesque in linguistic terms, and the actual carnival of being and doing itself (concert, festival, disco, club, shopping, and so on). Clair Wills is hasty to criticize the lack of connections between the textual carnival and the carnivalesque as a genuine social force. Similarly, Ann Jefferson agrees that authoring is by its very nature a decarnivalizing activity, since the authorial perspective and the demarcation between observer and participants are against the whole spirit of carnival.

So although Bakhtin's interpretation of what he refers to as "the novel"—defined by a proclivity to display different languages interpenetrating one another—allows examples of language outside the bounds of what traditional scholars would think of as strictly literary history, such as pop lyrics and advertising, to be studied as
instances of the language use he finds in heteroglottal novelization, despite the linguistic heteroglossia of the style magazine and the dialogism of the advertisement, cinema film or pop record, no text can come closer to carnival than the levels of description, imitation, and representation. There will always be some kind of dichotomy between the carnivalesque discourses of the text and the social power of its actual equivalent—the festivals at Woodstock or Altamont, for example, a Sex Pistols gig or all-night disco, a consumer spree in a giant shopping mall, audience participation on a popular television game show, the realities of being and doing.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember Bakhtin's words: "great novelistic images continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation; they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth" (DN 422). Rather than simply subscribing to the cliche of "different times, different interpretations," Bakhtin is suggesting that the heteroglottal novelization of all language structures in all dialogic texts, irrespective of origin and original purpose, allows them to be given new relevance, new meaning, new interest as they are subjected, like the texts used in this study, to new readings and new analyses.

It is this independent, interdependent battle and play of different levels and layers of interested dialogue that gives every text a variety of meanings, interpretations, subtexts. This quality of inherent polyglossia means that texts produced for very direct and immediate purposes like the rebellion and outrageousness of a Sex Pistols lyric or the hyped-up, overexposed commercialism of magazines like The Face can, in other times and contexts, come to assume a radically different meaning. But their meaning is still a textual meaning, their dialogism a textual dialogism. In the place of the powerful, social polyglossia of the real carnival, all we can observe instead is the "lonely carnival of reading."19

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**NOTES**

1 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. and tr. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, Tex., 1981). In their glossary to *The Dialogic Imagination*, Holquist and Emerson note that Bakhtin renders both *polyglossia* and *heteroglossia* with the Russian word raznorečie, raznorečivost'. By the word *heteroglossia*, I intend to refer to what Holquist and Emerson describe in their glossary as "The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be
a set of conditions . . . that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions” (p. 428).

2 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in The Dialogic Imagination, p. 422; hereafter cited in text as DN.


4 See Michael Holquist’s reference to Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel,” in “Introduction” to The Dialogic Imagination, p. xix.


7 For some good examples of this type of language in recent literary theory, see Arthur Kroker and David Cook, The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics (New York, 1986) and Panic Encyclopaedia (London, 1989).


9 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in The Dialogic Imagination, p. 170; hereafter cited in text as FT.

10 Terry Eagleton, “Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera,” in Bakhtin and Cultural Theory, p. 188.

11 Bakhtin, “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” in The Dialogic Imagination, p. 57; hereafter cited in text as FPN.


14 The quotes “hyperconformist consumer” and “shop-till-you-drop postmodern American way” are in McClellan, rev. of Rosalie Goes Shopping, p. 22. “There is nowhere left to go but to the shops” is a campaign slogan from the Situationiste Internationale of the type cited in Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 30–31.

15 Terry Eagleton, unpublished letter to the author.


17 Claire Wills, “Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women’s Texts,” in Bakhtin and Cultural Theory, p. 133; hereafter cited in text.
