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Joyful Mayhem: Bakhtin, Football Songs, and the Carnivalesque

MIKITA HOY

Any social force as commonly stigmatized as the subculture of the football song must necessarily be powerful in the ways it threatens and disrupts all levels and elements of society. Bakhtin's theories of carnival and the carnivalesque are applied to recent British football songs in order to shed new light upon the relationship between lyric and performance, between magic mantras and identity, between chants and challenges, and between allegiances and enemies. This reading entails an examination of some of the ways in which football songs work to demolish fear and piety through confrontation and contemporizing, thus disrupting the official solemnity of the status quo. Insights into the nature of carnivalesque laughter, uncrowning rituals, and performative disorder lead to a new understanding of football chants and their associations with radical resistance, counterculture, and reclaiming the issue of misrule. The impulse to carnival expressed in the football song dramatizes and enlivens an otherwise mute and unconscious confrontation with the restrictions of the parent culture, thereby bespeaking an anarchic and carnivalesque impetus which is, in fact, channelled by a complex set of regularities and graduated levels.

We must listen at the streets before we listen at the towers.

Paul Willis, Profane Culture

The distant clamor of a chanting football crowd embodies, to most people, all they most fear and loathe: drunken, bawdy, brawling male youths violating public peace and privacy by howling out their trivial allegiances. For the last ten years, television news and tabloid broadsheets have regularly featured lurid articles and photographs testifying to the latest outbreaks of football violence. International matches in particular are often highlighted as the sites of horrifying aggression and injury, and the U.S. crowd control police are already manning their forces to deal with the predicted onslaught of violence heralded by preparations for the 1994 World Cup. The self-styled football hooligan with his angry repertoire of indignant songs has become the object not only of tabloid mythology, but also of public dread: the smutty, rioting, chanting folk devil of popular imagination.

It is my suspicion that any anthematized marginal subculture must be extremely powerful in the way it so easily threatens all levels and elements of society, and in the following study I hope to discover some of the reasons why and in what ways football songs work, through a system of uncrowning and contemporizing, to demolish fear and piety and thereby disrupt the official solemnity of the status quo. Any phenomena so threatening must, it seems, be also somehow meaningful in its presentation of radical and often unpopular views addressing social, political, racial, and sexual inequities and so on, thereby airing explicit versions of normally repressed ideas about society, its valuations and ideologies.

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If the songs of the folk devil are not simply random manifestations of thoughtless impulses to violence and disruption, then neither are they too shifting, trivial, or transient to have any lasting effect. In this essay, I want to understand precisely what it is about the distancing and degrading nature of the football song that has allowed this particular branch of urban subculture to become so forcefully stigmatized. This question may be approached by looking at some of the ways in which football songs relate to their parent societies and other traditions, by considering their dynamic and contradictory associations with commercial phenomena, including media images and stereotypes, and by examining their associations with tangential political and ideological issues. The aim of this essay is to discover whether the displaced, marginalized, and autonomized discourse of the football song is in fact a regulated and hierarchical form of festivity ordered by a set of rules governing its aesthetic practice, whose anarchic and carnivalesque impetus is carefully channelled by a series of regularities and graduated levels.

FOOTBALL SONGS AS BAKHTINIAN CARNIVALESQUE

The public, ritualistic, performative nature of the football song and its relation to the present and to reality, its primitivist celebration of simplicity and timelessness, and its integrity of form require access to some highly ambiguous social functions, both subversive and conservative. Bakhtin’s readings of novelization and the carnivalesque allow for a more thoughtful and sensitive understanding of the ambivalent nature of recent British football songs than that provided by the discourse of the media or social studies or ideology. Bakhtin’s approach would seem to suggest that the subcultural performance comes alive and communicates only when the participants provide it with their own interpretations and understandings, a conclusion similar to that reached by scholars working on television and popular media audiences, such as Janice Radway’s feminist reception theory.

A great deal of work has been undertaken on the sociology of football and football supporting by a number of performance scholars, and especially by theorists associated with the Centre for Sport Studies at Leicester University in England. The study of British football spectators has already received considerable attention within the enterprise of English language cultural studies, and the practices of football fans will no doubt continue to be the object of attention within national and specialist sociological schools, especially those investigating crowds and crowd violence, for some time to come. Social scientists who have paid particular attention to football and the performance behavior of its supporters include Mike Brake in Comparative Youth Culture, Peter Marsh in Aggro: The Illusion of Violence, Paul Willis in Profane Culture, and Stuart Hall in Ingham’s Football Hooliganism: The Wider Context. In The Rules of Disorder, Marsh, Elizabeth Rosser and Rom Harré undertake an extensive socio-psychological survey of the behavioral habits of the teenage supporters of Oxford United; in View from the Boys, Howard Parker analyzes the results of a performance study on a group of inner-city, adolescent football supporters, and in Saturday’s Boys, Harry Lansdown and Alex Spillius present a collection of essays on the philosophy of the football fan, with an interesting contribution on A.J. Ayer. More
recently, journalist Bill Buford’s *Amongst the Thugs* details an account of a year spent in the company of skinheads and other football supporters, including involvement in European-cup related football violence, which Buford, much to his dismay, soon came to enjoy. The only writings specifically on football songs, however, seem to be limited chiefly to supporters’ fanzines, and to these, as well as to other sources, I am greatly indebted.

The argument that British football songs can best be understood as examples of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque necessarily excludes other rhetorical methods. It also excludes other methods of cultural performance study, such as social drama analysis, that might also seem appropriate inroads of access. It seems to me that Bakhtin’s method is the most effective not only because it pays special attention to the foregrounding of laughter, humor, irony, and elements of self-parody, but also because there are some very obvious connections between Bakhtinian carnival, as described in *Discourse in the Novel*, and the football match itself. There are some striking resemblances, for example, in terms of special, sacred time in the flow of secular (working) time, and a suspension of the convention of secular time at three o’clock on a Saturday afternoon. The football ground itself is also a kind of sacred space within secular space—and, moreover, like many other forms of subcultures, football is regulated festivity. The anarchic, carnivalesque charge is confined within a carefully policed stadium, just as in Medieval carnival there were set limits to the time allowed for such activities, with ritualistic re-introductions back into “normal” ecclesiastical and official time and space. In her work on Bakhtin Linda Hutcheon has pointed out that there is something quite ironic about the fact that the carnivalesque involves rigid regularities, discrete groups, graduated hierarchies and so on, which brings up the question of just how carnivalesque this kind of structured, rigorous, hierarchical festivity really is (what Deleuze has called the haecceity [thisness] of the particular configuration of circumstances at each particular event may well be helpful here). It could possibly be argued that the football song is really only a parodic protest, which links up, following Hutcheon, with the idea of carnival as a safety-valve, with an essentially conservative function socially. It would be unwise to forget that the potential of carnival for radical rebellion is in the end politically limited, since it is, after all, licensed misrule, a contained and officially sanctioned rebellion, after which everybody gets back to work.

There are further arresting analogies between the football ground and Bakhtinian carnival. In *Discourse in the Novel*, Bakhtin discovers that carnival is broadly popular in its potential inclusiveness (occurring as it does within an “unraised” place, a “public square,” not unlike the football field itself). Analogously then, football songs fit readily into theories of carnivaledized discourse because they consist broadly of a series of metaphors and images culled from the “lower spheres” of life (what Bakhtin refers to as “Socratic degradations”)—the worlds of tradesmen, everyday actions, and so on which serve to bring the world closer in order for us to examine it fearlessly. The aim of the carnivalesque discourse, according to Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, is “to feed on dense experience: to be with the smell of real human bodies.”

Rhetorical literary methods of performance analysis focus on the role of language, tropes, semantics, and so on within the performance situation.
Whereas football songs do contain linguistic idiosyncrasies and so forth (in the narrow sense), they are generally of secondary importance and in this genre acquire special functions that are oblique. Nor is it especially profitable to apply to these songs the same methods of approach that scholars such as Brake and Parker apply to their contexts, such as levels of segregation, stereotyping, competitiveness, environmental psychology, or changing attitudes and behavior (although of course these and related issues will inevitably surface from time to time in a Bakhtinian study). Bakhtin, on the other hand, pays special attention to the virtues of folk songs and folk traditions which, he writes, seem to provide a kind of identity and a belief in a sense of collective community. He observes how such forms of heteroglottal novelization involve an indeterminacy, a semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality and the ongoing present.

Of course, all forms of subcultures are not necessarily by definition dialogical, just as all “high” culture is not necessarily monological, and there are a variety of distinctions to be made between different types of subcultures and the different layers and levels of dialogism they involve. Once a form of heteroglottal novelization has been identified, however, it never remains merely as one form of “construction of the whole” (Bakhtin’s interpretative definition of genre) amongst others, nor does it co-relate with other genres in peaceful or harmonious co-existence. Instead, it aids the novelization of other genres and helps to bring them into the zone of novelization.

Chants and Challenges

The kinds of football chant I examined here are a solely British phenomenon (their equivalents are rarely heard in any other country) and have been developed not to be read or analyzed (or even, for that matter, written down), but to be chanted and sung as part of a ritualistic public performance. They arise from the tradition of folk songs, popular lays, burlesque rhymes, and ballads, and they are related to local, patriotic or nationalistic songs and chants celebrating the supremacy of the singer’s home town, county, or country. The use of ritual argot or slang is linked to the familiar strata of folk language which plays an enormous part in the formulation of novelistic discourse.

Social or cultural performance analysis might focus attention on why such songs are specifically British, or why specifically male (and I have found it necessary in this essay to engage in a male gendered practice; even though I am writing as a woman—and as a football supporter—I have deliberately used the male pronoun throughout). In a study of the environmental psychology of football grounds, Canter et al. suggest that the British obsession with football supporting relates directly to the boredom of so much of the British working-class social life and to its puritanism. Canter adds that old social hierarchies still contribute to generating the carnival urge, particularly the elitist tier structure of the football ground (stands, seats, and boxes), most of which were built in the deprived, working-class or slum areas of large provincial towns or cities (Millwall’s “Lion’s Den,” a grimy pit enclosed between railway lines and a dog-track in the east end of London, being the most obvious example). Other perfor-
mance critics (Trivizas; Whannel) have pointed out that the directness and irreverence of this kind of chanting provide a direct challenge to institutionalized forms of politeness. The spontaneity and lack of formality of most songs highlight the restrictions of a bureaucratic, neighbor-watching conformism away from the terraces. It would then follow that the piratical, outrageous air of the chanting fan finds its meaning and clumsy grace from the "ludicrous orderedness" of the rest of us. Another explanation for the phenomenon comes perhaps paradoxically from the football fan's sensed loss in personal autonomy: he is part of a mass, chanting crowd excluded from "social normality," but at the same time his style mocks and parodies conventional values and implies some kind of superior vision.

Many writers on football and football spectating (Guttmann; Fielding; Harrison) have noted how this sense of "otherness" and alienation is one of the most radical and significant elements of the football chant, as of many other areas of subculture. It is therefore interesting to speculate why, in the 1980s, so many organized football supporters' groups were right-wing Thatcherites, the middle-class nouveau riche. Much to Mrs. Thatcher's embarrassment, many of her ardent supporters were "football hooligans." Many incidents were reported in the 1980s of fans of southern teams (and other teams from areas of relatively stable employment) waving wads of five-pound notes at northern fans in the grip of a localized economic recession, and singing chants like "Loads o'money, loads o'money, loads o'money," and, to the tune of the Liverpool theme song "You'll Never Walk Alone":

\begin{verbatim}
You'll never work again
You'll never work again
\end{verbatim}

Social science writers like Marsh, Rosser, and Harré would agree that such chants have a paradoxical character and involve a parodic restatement (via other popular cultural practices such as British television comedy) of old representations of the south (especially the southeast) as prosperous, stable, and cultured, and the north as a cold wasteland of poverty and ignorance. A sociological explanation for this new "class" of fans might refer to the fact that football supporting is no longer a traditional working-class pastime because it is no longer cheap. Tickets for the stands of most Premier League clubs now cost at least nine or ten pounds, and due to the current recession many once-stalwart working-class supporters can no longer afford to follow their team regularly.

As a result, most modern spectators of football today prefer watching the televised highlights of the previous day's matches on Sunday afternoons to travelling long distances to wait on a wet and crowded stand. The two experiences are only remotely related, but it might be unwise to suggest that football is, anymore, a pure folk-phenomenon. Like many other such folk subcultures (pirate radio, independent-label rock music, fanzines) it has been colonized by the media, and this must surely alter the ways such forms are now being used (to promote advertising, to increase viewing figures, to encourage political nationalism and so on), no matter to what extent they might derive from older folk forms.
Lyric and Performance

Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque attends to a number of details that cultural performance and social science analysis of subcultures cannot. Part of the appropriateness of this method, as the work done on Bakhtin by other performance scholars demonstrates, is Bakhtin’s recognition of the word as performed, which is clearly vital to the understanding of football songs. In Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics, Bakhtin explains his ideas of the carnivalesque in language as a live event, played out at the point of a dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses, dialogically united to the world it describes. Carni-
valesque discourse, unlike traditional language, does not mirror the world mimetically, but is rather part of it, interacts with it to transform discourse, speaker, and audience: “The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life. . . .” 2

Similarly, the lyrics of football songs are themselves a kind of performance. Even a seemingly accidental, insignificant pretext can serve as an immediate or external starting point for a dialogue. Accidental encounters on the pitch or in the stands, news of the latest scores, and so on can all serve as impetus for new chants. Many old songs are spontaneously adapted to fit immediate circum-
stances, often in a comic vein. These range from the most obvious repetitions of new scores (“two-nil, two-nil, two-nil”) to more complex references. Norwich City fans, for example, with their team three-nil down and struggling against Arsenal, have been heard to sing “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” from Monty Python’s Life of Brian. Sunderland fans, after Arsenal boss George Graham had been fined for a brawl a week earlier, chanted:

Where’s your wages gone,
Where’s your wages gone?

Manchester United supporters recently formulated an impromptu version of their rival team Manchester City’s theme song “Blue Moon” with specific reference to the recent transference of the City manager, Howard Kendall:

Too soon,
You started singing too soon,
You were winning 3–1,
Now Howard Kendall is gone.

And Preston North End’s recent dissatisfaction with their management prompted chants (to the tune of Edward Souza’s “Stars and Stripes Forever”) of:

Sack the board, sack the board, sack the board . . .

In Discourse in the Novel, Bakhtin writes about the simplicity and timelessness of traditional ballads, folk songs, and ritual mantras and the ways in which they aid the establishment of self-identity. This is another way in which the carni-
valesque lyrics of the football song are themselves, as with other subcultures, part of a community performance. Shared chants such as Chelsea’s popular anthem, whose simple words are displayed on a digital screen throughout the match (flashing on and off in blue and white at half time so that fans and families
can all sing along) are presumably supposed to bring the rewards of participation, a sense of "being together" in support of a team and sharing a united front against "the others":

   Blue is the colour,  
   Football is the game,  
   We're all together;  
   And winning is our aim.

Whatever the aim of Chelsea's management in promoting this chant at matches—possibly to discourage the singing of other, less welcoming songs—it certainly expounds a participatory performance. Participation in such a voluntary organization as a football supporter's club is an extremely favorable condition for self-commitment, the enhancing of self-esteem, and the provision of personal satisfaction. Perhaps Chelsea's management, burdened with one of the worst reputations for violence in the whole football league, is attempting to replace fighting with chanting as a "natural performance arena" for the exercise of masculine qualities, for the creation of group bonds, and for the development of localized forms of social organization—features which are often posited as the key to football's contemporary importance.

Chelsea's family anthem, as a form of ritual performance mantra, establishes a kind of united self-identity ("we're all together"). This song supplies possibilities for the exploitation of a regressive, primitivistic celebration of simplicity and timelessness ("Blue is the color"; "football is the game"). The history of such subcultural performance utterances can be traced back through the complex roots of ballads and folk songs to a point before tonal conventions had become determining, where repeated conventional cadences provided a rhythmic foundation.\(^3\) The rhythmic regularity of the Chelsea chant's trimeter is an alternative to (say) the iambic pentameter, which stresses the curve of a uniquely individual voice speaking across the metrical pattern. Alternatively, the rhythm of Chelsea's chant points to performance creativity ("we're all together"), as opposed to the individualistic voice.

### Magic Mantras

The power of the word to effect its curse or blessing on the subject has always been regarded as an act full of magic significance. Historical remains of curse-words etched into wood, dropped into wells, or chalked onto the walls of caves long pre-dates the advent of general literacy. And so in speech and performance: the magical idea that what one says can physically effect the person one says it to survives today in the law of libel and in the nervous shiftings of real and assumed names amongst celebrities and others, and it has always had its counterpart in the idea of the evil eye. Similarly, the singing of football performance songs signifies entry into the world of ritual and the formal genesis of a respected self. Many of these chants seem to work as ritual mantras of praise and worship, generally of the home team and its supporters, often achieved in the ritualistic degradation of the opposition, in songs like:

   We hate . . . Leeds and Leeds and Leeds and Leeds . . .
One song, sung to the tune of “My Liverpool Home,” lends a certain amount of support to the otherwise mythical thesis that a large proportion of football songs originated in the Liverpool stadium:

In their Manchester slums,
In their Manchester slums,
They look in a dustbin for something to eat,
They find a dead cat and they think it’s a treat,
In their Manchester slums . . .

The original version of this song is a Liverpudlian self-parody, now turned satirically outwards, whilst retaining the inner irony. This kind of performance is now almost completely out of fashion. More popular today are performance chants which praise the team’s individual players:

One Simon Tracey, there’s only one Simon Tracey . . .
Deane-o, Deane-o, Deane-o . . .
Ooh, ah, Cantona . . .

or laud the virtues of a the team in general, as in chants like:

Everton are white, Everton are white, oh-oh, oh-oh . . .
Glory, glory Leeds United, and the blues go marching on on on
Georgie Graham’s blue-and-white army

or apply popular songs, such as “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” “Que Sera Sera,” or “I Can’t Help Falling in Love With You” to the favored team. This internal system of ritual order allows chants to be adaptable and extendable; and popular, pre-accepted songs are used in the creation of new and more immediately relevant performance chants. Most chants are sung to the tunes of recent, popular or older, traditional British or American songs, such as “Guantanamo,” “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean,” “One Man Went to Mow,” “Blue Moon,” “An English Country Garden,” “Camptown Races,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “Cym Rhondda,” and “I Don’t Want to Join the Army.” Like their lyrics, the tunes to football chants tend to be interchangeable and extendable. These traditional, popular, and widely-known tunes are well-established in the way they influence feeling and emotion by “taking over” and performing disorganized excitement, emotions, and an electric atmosphere in a way that is perhaps impossible in non-carnivalized, non-performance speech.

PARADOX, PARODY, AND PLAY: AMBIVALENT CARNIVESQUE LAUGHTER

An area to which many performance scholars of Bakhtin have been perhaps inevitably drawn is his characterization of the relationship between performance and laughter. Linda Hutcheon draws attention to Bakhtin’s belief that contemporaneity was originally the main object of ambivalent laughter, and that “the common people’s creative culture of laughter” is “the broadest and richest of rituals.” In Rabelais and his World (1940), Bakhtin asserts that this kind of parodic-travestying form of laughter sets us free:

It is, after all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all people. Second, it is
universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants; the entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of the carnival.³

A social or environmental psychology approach to the role of this kind of carnivalesque laughter within subcultures cannot fully understand its performative function. On the other hand, a cultural performance approach may well fail to understand that this kind of laughter is, above all, a libidinal reflex. By drawing our attention to this aspect of laughter in various texts and cultures, Bakhtin shows us how it has a deep and philosophical meaning and represents one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and humanity. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter. Thus, because it is an interior form of truth, laughter has implications for the form that culture assumes. In Rabelais and his World, Bakhtin suggests that the various kinds of folkloric laughter liberate the consciousness from the confines of its own discourse and hence create freedom.

On the terraces, many football songs involve a burlesque show, a performative parody of generic styles. These parodic and travestying forms keep alive the memory of an ancient linguistic struggle and are continually animated by an ongoing process of linguistic stratification and diversification. Many football songs have a ludicrous and carnivalesque creativity and vitality far from fatalism and pessimism, and it is this basic force of laughter which gives such songs their resonant qualities and their power. A large percentage of the newer chants especially are comic or parodie and paradoxical. To fill in travelling time on the journeys to “away” matches, chant leaders are usually actively engaged in trying out new versions of old chants, or in making new ones up from scratch. Those songs which meet with approval are tried out at the match, and, if found to have some power, eventually make their way to the terraces.

Uncrowning

The main function of carnivalesque laughter within subcultures seems to be to uncrown or contemporize. Uncrowning is aimed at direct representation (or, in Bakhtin's words, “living reality”) and involves travesties of all lofty models embodied in national sporting myths. The English national team, the England manager, football, England itself, and so on are contemporized and brought low, represented on a plane equal with that of contemporary life, in an everyday environment, in the “low” language of contemporaneity where “common men” like Vinnie Jones, Eric Cantona, and other football heroes and anti-heroes can be worshipped or reviled en masse.⁵ Consequently, carnivalized legends spring up around the heroization (or anti-heroization) of the common man who becomes both hero and jester. Through the football chant, ordinary individuals become heroic; England team members Paul Gascoigne, Gary Lineker, Peter Shilton, John Barnes, and so on all become the mythologized subjects of the football culture folklore.

According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque laughter occurs in the zone of maximum familiar and crude contact. Laughter at the football game, as in other subcultures, generally leads to what Bakhtin would describe as a “necessary uncrowning,” a removal of the object (such as the opposition team, or its star players)
from a distanced plane, and an assault on or destruction of the distanced plane in general. Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations* contrasts this upcloseness with the distancing “aura” of a traditional work of art, suggesting how laughter draws an object up close to be examined, demolishing fear and piety before the world, so that it becomes an object of familiar contact. Benjamin’s relation of the mass organization of capitalist society to human identity may have some pressing connection with the anaesthetic effects of subcultures as an anodyne to the repressive trends of capitalism (and there are a number of interesting similarities between Bakhtin’s and Benjamin’s thinking in this area).

In the football ground, this kind of laughter, comedy, and serio-comedy develops and arises from the inconsistencies and tensions between rival supporters. It is full of paradoxes, parodies, and travesties, is multi-styled, and often includes elements of bilingualism. In other words, laughter opens things up for free investigation. On the plane of the carnivalesque, it is possible to disrespectfully “walk round” whole objects, and therefore the back and rear portion of an object assumes a special importance; compare the popular practice of “mooning” (displaying the buttocks) from supporters’ coaches at football matches. There is an important relation between this humor and modernist techniques—collage, cubism, montage, and so on.

The function of uncrowning is particularly notable when the humor is of a black or macabre variety, as in the comic football chants which parody tragic incidents, such as the Hillsborough disaster in Sheffield, or the Munich air crash of 1958, the latter which resulted in the deaths on a Belgrade runway of eight of the Manchester United football team:

Munich Munich ’58, Munich! 58!

or, to the tune of “I Don’t Want to Join the Army”:

Who’s that dying on the runway?
Who’s that dying in the snow?
It’s Matt Busby and its boys,
Making all the fucking noise,
‘Cos they can’t get their aeroplane to go.

or, to the tune of “An English Country Garden”:

How many lived and how many died,
In the Munich air disaster?
Eight of them died, so they played five-a-side,
In the Munich air disaster.

The tone of this chant involves a parodic and deliberate kind of bad taste which enables the chanters to deal with very tragic events. As in punk and carnival, the mocking of death is a prominent theme in football songs (described in Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World*) possibly relating to fantasies of immortality, and so on. In both the lyrics and performances of such songs, it is often difficult to decide whether “sacred” words, such as references to the ex-Manchester United team manager Matt Busby, to the chosen team, to the game itself, and so on are being used favorably, or whether there is a familiar, parodic “game of
words" in progress; in other words, it is difficult to tell if names are evoked in reverence or in sacrilege. It is moreover difficult to determine the degree of license evoked in this "play," which will vary from performance to performance. The sacred becomes sacrilegious at different times depending on who is doing the chanting, and the impact of the performance may change completely when it is sung by, for example, a Manchester United fan, a Manchester City supporter, or a (relatively) neutral Wimbledon fan.

PERFORMATIVE DISORDER: RECLAIMING MISRULE

Uncrowning generally leads to abuse, and abuse can often lead to blows. The question whether or not these violent chants encourage violence at matches has attracted a great deal of attention and academic research. The majority of academic focus on the football match has, in fact, concentrated on this very issue, and from a variety of intriguing perspectives, including environmental psychology (Canter et al.), cultural studies (Clarke), anthropology (Guttmann), politics (Ingham), and economics (Wiseman). These studies seem to suggest that the general assumption of a connection between football chants and violent crime is generally a matter of context. What count as violent, hooligan-style chants for some are merely high spirits for others, and some football songs widely described as manifestations of hooliganism and violence appear to be more or less spontaneous expressions of elation, dejection, frustration, anger, and so on, generated by the ups and downs of a match. In fact, media mythologies of football aggression are not borne out by statistical evidence.\(^8\)

Bakhtin’s reading of the innate connections between word and performance enable us to confront this issue directly. Whether violent words are accompanied by violent actions or not, Bakhtin, aware that language is not merely the mirror of society but the major force in constructing what we come to perceive and perform in reality, would argue that the violent performance is embedded in the word itself. In short, performative violence is innately embedded in violent words. In *Rabelais and his World*, the exaggerated violence of folk songs is, according to Bakhtin, "... a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official 'truth.'"\(^9\)

The disorder of football songs often seems surprising when placed alongside the rest of the supporter’s lifestyle; however, this is not to say that the shocking style, swearing, and praise of aggression which are so stigmatized by "conventional" society actually conceal little impact, as is indexed especially by the abuse of Gascoigne and Lineker, and especially by the racist abuse of Barnes.\(^10\) Other more outrageous and threatening players are similarly built up through the medium of football chants into powerful aggressors. Football anti-heroes like Vinnie Jones and the supporters who sing about them come to represent, for most people—especially the feature writers of the tabloid papers—all that is senseless and destructive in society, thus functioning as a form of folk devil. By setting up certain members of society as visible examples of what is condemned and by attributing to them certain characteristics, such characters come to serve in the popular imagination as images of disorder and evil. Similarly, in Bakhtinian terms, the football ground and its environs has become a kind of carnivalesque folk theatre for the cultural expression of "aggro" or the parodic
festival of disrespect and misrule, expressed primarily through violent performances and performative utterances, or in sexist or racist confrontation, with chants and songs. This code of disorder and misrule in songs like the following is well-accepted by both chanters and the recipients of such chants:

Arsenal boys, we are here
Shag your women and drink your beer

In terms of aggression, the consistent use of profane language in the football chant dramatizes and enlivens what is being said; and rather than being a limiting factor, this is one of the most successful aspects of the football song since it enables the chanter to fill his verbal range with a force of meaning and muscularity of style enabling a distinctive and incontrovertible expression of feelings impossible to other, more polite modes of discourse. The aggressive masculinity of these violent and racist chants is often unspecified and enigmatic, but their charge of feeling is usually strong. Such chants have an integrity of form and atmosphere as well as an immediate, concrete confidence which maintains what Bakhtin refers to in his description of the carnivalesque as a “direct responsiveness” to “living concerns.” These aggressive kinds of football chants serve the purpose of symbolic as well as performative disorder, in which language can serve a ritual purpose, just as the wearing of “hard gear” such as Dr. Marten’s boots is symbolic as well as instrumental. In a way, aggressive chants directed at the state of play on the pitch and occurring in the interactional posturing between rival fans can be interpreted metonymically, being recognized as proper parts or adjuncts to real performances of violence. Many of the chanters’ activities can be understood as symbolic performances in this mode of metonymy: that is, in Bakhtinian terms, words can be regarded as performances of detached elements of sequences of actions which would, if carried through seriously, lead to the injury or death of the rivals.

Studies of the lyrics of U.S. rap bands have demonstrated how such metonymic displays of aggression can serve to enact the establishment of the rapper’s self-identity as part of a community performance. The sense of self-commitment and participation inherent within such localized forms of social organization thereby permits individuals to reclaim those elements of their identity which have been abused and appropriated in other cultural contexts. In this way, U.S. rappers have reappropriated the white term of abuse nigger for individual restatements of black identity. For the football fan, in a similar way, these metonymic forms of aggression and violence allow the reclaiming from fashionable politics of unfashionably male attributes such as dominant masculinity, the excitement of pursuit and overthrow, and the rediscovery of a forcefully individual male language and space. This is especially important if we remember that a large percentage of British football fans, especially since the decline of the Thatcherite boom, are working-class, undereducated, oppressed, and often unemployed.

Let us look at a few specific examples in more detail. The very range of abusive words chosen in these aggressive songs is itself important. The ritual and often racist insults exchanged between supporters and directed at players on the pitch often consist of words which bolster the individual chanter’s male space by
casting doubt upon the masculinity of others. For example:

He's brown, he's bent, his arse is up for rent,
    Stevie Bull, Stevie Bull, Stevie Bull . . .

Arsenal boys, wank wank wank . . .
Oh, he's a wanker, he's a wanker . . .
Kenny Dagliesh is a homosexual . . .

(and note also the chant "bald headed bastard, he's just a bald headed bastard" in contrast to a favorable chant in praise of home players with receding hairlines, "he's got no hair but we don't care . . .''). Quite clearly, the main objective of these stylized male insults seems to be the simultaneous denial of the opponent's masculinity and the reclaiming of the chanter's own male space. The most frequently-used terms for insulting a rival fan or player are usually "dirty" words generally associated with toilet functions, such as "shit," "pisshead," "knobhead," and so on, usually including such terms of homosexual abuse as "bugger," "poofter," "queer," "bender," and "arse-bandit." The most common and the most serious insult at football matches is undoubtedly the word "wanker," often being accompanied by a hand gesture mimicking the male masturbatory movement, occasionally being replaced by the gesture alone. Such insulting terms always figure predominantly in the more aggressive songs and chants, and they provide an integral part of the ritual reappropriation of masculinity. Songs and chants like these, incidentally, crop up in virtually all examples of masculine subcultural groups where ritual anthems develop, such as college songs, rugby chants, beer-drinking chants, travelling songs, and so on.

In his suggestion that carnivalesque laughter occurs in the zone of maximum familiar and crude contact, and sometimes leads to blows, Bakhtin brings an important angle to any discussion of aggression in relation to football songs. By emphasizing the relation of laughter to violence, Bakhtin emphasizes the libidinal nature of laughter and its associations with tension, with bad taste, and with the mocking of death. In effect, Bakhtin foregrounds the nature of laughter as opposing, and yet at the same time connected to, the death instinct. Freud argued that the instinctual aspects of behavior tend to be conservative or regressive, capable of being directed either outwardly or inwardly, just like the sexual instinct, with its object and ego libido. The formulation of Thanatos thus enabled Freud to postulate an instinctual basis for all the hostile, violent, and self-destructive acts that human beings perpetrate upon each other and themselves. The deathly travesty of the football song seems to be instinctual in nature, with many sexual elements, containing a level of aggression and violence which seems to bespeak the libidinal associations between laughter and bloodshed.

Clearly, this issue of violence elicits a number of attendant issues, and the consistently problematic nature of these questions begin to reveal the limitations of Bakhtin. What can theories of carnival tell us about the relationship, for example, between the chanting fan and the object of his abuse? Is the obscene language of such songs related in any way to the high police presence at many football games? A number of these chants are considered offensive on racist, sexist, heterosexist, fascist, and chauvinistic grounds, and it might be worth speculating whether the kinds of carnivalesque pleasure attained by one social
group from such songs can ever compensate in any way for the oppression, alienation, and violent machismo they undoubtedly engender towards others.

FOOTBALL SONGS, COUNTERCULTURE, AND RADICAL RESISTANCE

Another limitation of Bakhtin is his tendency towards romantic populism. In properly reacting to the patrician-pessimistic case about popular culture, for example, Bakhtin tends to perhaps downplay the more negative aspects of it, which can sometimes be quite violent and aggressive. He tends to idealize popular culture in order to rescue it from the patrician pessimists, and, in doing so, perhaps makes his case less cogent. What this issue of violence raises, however, is the impossibility, with a Bakhtinian method, of divorcing the aesthetic from the political nature of such songs. It becomes virtually impossible to separate either the chants themselves from their ritual or performative significance, or the pleasures they involve from the social and ideological determinants of all subcultures. This is partly because pleasure is an ideological phenomenon anyway, and partly because much of the pleasure produced by such songs emerges from their expression of normally repressed ideas about the status quo.

Indeed, one of the most interesting of Bakhtin’s ideas is his understanding of the interrelation of aesthetics and politics, and his refusal to ignore moral and ideological components. There are currently a number of contemporary critics writing on Bakhtin (including Pechey; Hirschkop and Shepherd; Patterson) who have been drawn to precisely this issue—the ways in which Bakhtin was influenced by Marxism in his belief that language could not be separated from an intimate connection with ideology, drawing culture into the social and economic sphere, and suggesting that language, a socially-constructed system, is itself a political and material reality. Graham Pechey writes that “To understand the radicalism of Bakhtin’s thinking is to understand that in his concepts, the border of the sociopolitical has already been crossed.”

Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque help us to understand how subcultures can access social or political conflicts by allowing the parent culture to seem ridiculous and therefore less “venerated,” in Bakhtinian terms. In other words, the impulse towards carnival may represent the performance of an otherwise mute and largely unconscious popular resistance to the restrictions and limitations of the parent culture. In a number of ways, it seems, Bakhtin’s reading of the carnivalesque helps us to a new and better understanding of the relationship between subculture, performance, and many traditional cultural values, by firstly being predicated over the whole of discourse without exception.

In this way, Bakhtin allows us to begin to understand some of the reasons why the football song is so powerfully stigmatized as a popular cultural form. A Bakhtinian reading shows how most football songs either allude to or contain a series of cultural and countercultural class (and other) struggles, and their implications of radical and sometimes violent social change present a challenge to institutionalized cultural forms. This revision, moreover, is not limited to the leftward animus of the carnival with its involved collocation of class and cultural struggles. These songs also involve radical right-wing properties and a movement towards the right-wing revision of institutions by, say, displaying frequently unpopular attitudes towards the sexual and political status quo, address-
ing social inadequacies, hypocrisy in religion and government, and so on. It is interesting to consider to what extent both these rightward and leftward properties are bound together in many of the songs. Paradoxically, however, there is a hedonistic element to the football song as well, in that it often demonstrates a tendency to ignore or disguise the social and political forces responsible for its own shaping.

Bakhtin acknowledges the importance of subculture not only as a fruitful area of study but also as an intrinsic part of lived experience, viewed not from a political or sociological perspective nor as a “lower” branch of culture, but rather as a different (but equally valuable) mythology, sign-system, or aesthetic. He allows for a textual analysis of subculture which, instead of criticizing its simplicity or limitations, considers the ways in which its particular system of cultural formations presents an alternative version of culture as it is lived. Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque allow us to understand how the uncompromising resistance of football songs leaves them free to express profanity and confrontation in new, symbolic ways, free to deconstruct social conventions through especially powerful and radical means, and free to unveil the dark face of culture, however obscure and shocking that face may be.  

**ENDNOTES**

1Bakhtin, *Problems* 47.
2Bakhtin, *Problems* 47.
3Willis 72.
4Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 52, 77.
5Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 11-12.
6Vinnie Jones is an ex-Wimbledon forward who captained Leeds United and Sheffield United before taking up a place with Chelsea. Famed for his distinctive skinhead haircut and manly physique, Jones is regularly fined for “off-the-ball” incidents, including an infamous and much-photographed clinch on Gascoigne’s testicles. Vinnie Jones has recently been in the news promoting his latest video, entitled *The Hard Men of Football,* comprising a hand-picked selection of nasty fouls. Eric Cantona is a handsome and popular French player first signed up for British soccer by Leeds United.
7Minutes before the kick-off of the 1989 F.A. Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, disastrous overcrowding and crowd mismanagement led to the death by suffocation of ninety-six Liverpool supporters, and the hospitalization of four hundred more.
8In the worst season for violence, at a club with the worst record for violence, only 39 out of every 10,000 supporters were arrested, i.e., only 0.39%, and out of these the majority, almost 70%, were charged with “threatening or abusive behaviour” rather than assault or mayhem.
10John Barnes is a black player for Liverpool who suffers unending racist taunts from opposition supporters, including a vogue for hurling bananas on to the pitch. At one point this trend became so widespread that bananas were banned from a number of football grounds, even as part of a lunch-pack.
11See Willis.
12See Marsh, Rosser, and Harré.
13Pechey 65.
14Acknowledgements for the collection of chants used in this article are extended to David Finn, David Bilton, David Preistman, and Christopher Dane.

**WORKS CITED**


