not surprise us, because it is also a characteristic feature of the emphasis given to the cut of clothes within 'high' fashion sketches. The essential point, moreover, is that the 'Hooligan' style was recognisable to their contemporaries (and presumably to themselves) as a distinctive mode of attire, thus helping to form the feeling which was struggling to give itself expression in other areas, that too much freedom and affluence had been given to the working class at the turn of the century. The evening promenade, ridiculed as the 'monkey walk', when young people gathered together in their finery hoping to 'click' with a member of the opposite sex was another sure sign of the unchaperoned freedoms of the new street people who would inherit the new century. Not only could slum youth sometimes afford to pay their fines when they appeared in the police courts — a shocking enough fact to their respectable contemporaries that was often remarked upon — but they could even pick and choose what clothes they would wear when they came to court. Where would it all end?

Chapter 31

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White

FROM CARNIVAL TO TRANSGRESSION [1986]

The new historian, the genealogist, will know what to make of this masquerade. He will not be too serious to enjoy it; on the contrary, he will push the masquerade to its limits and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing. Genealogy is history in the form of a concerted carnival.

(Foucault 1977: 160–1)

In the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realisation that established authority and truth are relative.

(Bakhtin 1968: 10)

There is now a large and increasing body of writing which sees carnival not simply as a ritual feature of European culture but as a mode of understanding, a positivity, a cultural analytic. How is it that a festive ritual now virtually eliminated from most of the popular culture of Europe has gained such prominence as an epistemological category? Is there a connection between the fact of its elimination as a physical practice and its self-conscious emergence in the artistic and academic discourses of our time? For both Michel Foucault in the passage cited above and for Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal study Rabelais and His World, the Nietzschean study of history leads to the ideal of carnival. Everywhere in literary and cultural studies today we see carnival emerging as a model, as an ideal and as an analytic category in a way that, at first sight, seems puzzling.
Undoubtedly it was the translation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s monumental study of Rabelais and the carnivalesque which initially catalysed the interest of Western scholars (albeit slowly – the book was only translated into English in 1968) around the notion of carnival, marking it out as a site of special interest for the analysis of literature and symbolic practices. Rabelais and his World is ostensibly a scholarly study of Rabelais’s popular sources in carnivalesque folk-culture which shows how indebted Rabelais is to the popular, non-literary, ‘low’ folk humour of the French Renaissance. His intention in the study was self-consciously iconoclastic:

No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to old pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.

(Bakhtin 1968: 3)

Naturally this reading of Rabelais has not gone unchallenged by conventionally learned scholars. But although Bakhtin is deeply concerned to elucidate the sources of Rabelais’s work, the main importance of his study is its broad development of the ‘carnivalesque’ into a potent, populist, critical inversion of all official words and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the specific realm of Rabelais studies. Carnival, for Bakhtin, is both a populist utopian vision of the world seen from below and a festive critique, through the inversion of hierarchy, of the ‘high’ culture:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immaterialized and complete.

(Bakhtin 1968: 109)

Carnival in its widest, most general sense embraced ritual spectacles such as fairs, popular feasts and wakes, processions and competitions, comic shows, mummeries and dancing, open-air amusement with costumes and masks, giants, dwarfs, monsters, trained animals and so forth; it included comic verbal compositions (oral and written) such as parodies, travesties and vulgar farce; and it included various genres of ‘Billinggate,’ by which Bakhtin designated curses, oaths, slang, humour, popular tricks and jokes, scatological forms, in fact all the ‘low’ and ‘dirty’ sorts of folk humour. Carnival is presented by Bakhtin as a world of topsy-turvy, heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless over-running and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled.

If there is a principle to this hodge-podge it resides in the spirit of carnivalesque laughter itself, to which Bakhtin ascribes great importance:

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnivalesque laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic’ event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the 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.

(Bakhtin 1968: 11–12)

Carnival laughter, then, has a vulgar, ‘earthly’ quality to it. With its oaths and profanities, its abusive language and its mocking words it was profoundly ambivalent. Whilst it humiliated and mortified it also revived and renewed. For Bakhtin ritual detiments went along with reinvigoration such that ‘it was precisely this ambivalent abuse which determined the genre of speech in carnival intercourse’ (Bakhtin 1968: 16). The ‘coarse’ and familiar speech of the fair and the marketplace provided a complex vital repertoire of speech patterns excluded from official discourse which could be used for parody, subversive humour and inversion. ‘Laughter degrades and materialises’ (Bakhtin 1968: 20). Fundamental to the corporeal, collective nature of carnival laughter is what Bakhtin terms ‘grotesque realism.’ Grotesque realism uses the material body – flesh conceptualized as corporeal excess – to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world. Thus already in Bakhtin there is the germinal notion of translations and displacements effected between the high/low image of the physical body and other social domains. Grotesque realism images the human body as multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, proletarian and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure and finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, snarled nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, ‘spirit’ reason).

Bakhtin is self-consciously utopian and lyrical about carnival and grotesque realism. Others, however, have been more critical. Whilst almost every reader of Bakhtin admires his comprehensive and engaged generosity, his combination of festive populism and deep learning, and whilst few would deny the immediate appeal and the vitality of the notion of carnival, various writers have been sceptical of Bakhtin’s overall project.

Terry Eagleton thinks that the weakness of Bakhtin’s positive embrace of carnival is transparent:

Indeed carnival is so vivaciously celebrated that the necessary political criticism is almost too obvious to make. Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained
popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.

(Eagleton 1981: 148)

Most politically thoughtful commentators wonder, like Eagleton, whether the ‘licensed release’ of carnival is not simply a form of social control of the low by the high and therefore serves the interests of that very official culture which it apparently opposes. The classic formulation of this is in Max Gluckman’s now somewhat dated Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa (1963) and Custom and Conflict (1956), in which he asserted that while these ‘rites of reversal obviously include a protest against the established order . . . they are intended to preserve and strengthen the established order’ (Gluckman 1956: 109). Roger Sales amplifies both on this process of containment and its ambivalence:

There were two reasons why the fizzy, dizzy carnival spirit did not necessarily undermine authority. First of all, it was licensed or sanctioned by the authorities themselves. They removed the stopper to stop the bottle being smashed altogether. The release of emotions and grievances made them easier to police in the long term. Second, although the world might appear to be turned upside down during the carnival season, the fact that Kings and Queens were chosen and crowned actually reaffirmed the status quo. Carnival was, however, Janus-faced. Falstaff is both the merry old minstrel of Eastcheap and the old corruptible who tries to undermine the authority, or rule, of the Lord Chief Justice. The carnival spirit, in early-nineteenth-century England as well as in sixteenth-century France, could therefore be a vehicle for social protest and the method for disciplining that protest.

(Sales 1983: 169)

... It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are innately radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression (White 1982: 60). The most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as catalysed site of actual and symbolic struggle.

It is in fact striking how frequently violent social clashes apparently ‘coincided’ with carnival. Le Roy Ladurie’s Carnival in Romans (1981) has popularized one such incident when the 1580 festival at Romans in eastern France was turned into armed conflict and massacre. Other social historians have documented similar occurrences (Davis 1975; Burke 1978; Thompson 1972). However, to call it a ‘coincidence’ of social revolt and carnival is deeply misleading, for as Peter Burke has pointed out, it was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — and then only in certain areas — that one can reasonably talk of popular politics dissociated from the carnivalesque at all. John Brewer has described English politics in the eighteenth century as ‘essentially a calendrical market,’ by which he designates a deliberate constricting of holiday and political events (in this case organized by the Hanoverians for conservative motives):

Far too little attention had [sic] been paid to the emergence during the eighteenth century of a Hanoverian political calendar, designed to inculcate loyal values in the populace, and to emphasize and encourage the growth of a national political consensus. Nearly every English market town celebrated the dates which were considered the important political landmarks of the nation. They could be found in most almanacs of the period, barely distinguishable from the time-honoured dates of May Day, Plough Monday, Twelfth Night, Shrove Tuesday and the like . . . In the early eighteenth century, these dates, together with the occasion of the Pretender’s birthday, were occasions of conflict. The year of the Jacobite Rebellion, 1715, was especially contentious, with Hanoverian Mug House clubs fighting it out in the streets with Jacobite apprentices and artisans. On October 30, frequenters of a Jacobite alehouse on Ludgate Hill were beaten up by members of the Loyal Society who were celebrating the birthday of the Prince of Wales, the future George II. A Jacobite attempt to burn William III in effigy on November 4 was thwarted by the same Whig clubmen who the next day tried to cremate effigies of the Pretender and his supporters. On 17 November further clashes ensued and two Jacobites were shot dead.

(Brewer et al. 1983: 247)

Again this should act as a warning against the current tendency to essentialize carnival and politics. On the one hand carnival was a specific calendrical ritual: carnival proper, for instance, occurred around February each year, ineluctably followed by Lenten fasting and abstinence bound tightly to laws, structures and institutions which had briefly been denied during its reign. On the other hand carnival also refers to a mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourses which were employed throughout social revolts and conflicts before the nineteenth century.

Recent work in the social history of carnival reveals its political dimensions to be more complex than either Bakhtin or his detractors might suspect.

... Carnivals, fairs, popular games and festivals were very swiftly politicized by the very attempts made on the part of local authorities to eliminate them. The dialectic of antagonism frequently turned ritual into resistance at the moment of intervention by the higher powers, even when no overt oppositional element had been present before . . .
In his research on the carnivalesque Bakhtin had substantially anticipated by some thirty years main lines of development in symbolic anthropology. In his exploration of the relational nature of festivity, its structural inversion of, and ambivalent dependence upon, official culture, Bakhtin set out a model of culture in which a high/low binarism had a fundamental place. Bakhtin’s use of carnival centres the concept upon its ‘doubtless . . . there is no unofficial expression without a prior official one or its possibility. Hence in Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival, the official and unofficial are locked together’ (Wilson 1983: 320). Symbolic polarities of high and low, official and popular, grotesque and classical are mutually constructed and deformed in carnival. Two of the best general synopses of Bakhtin’s work correctly perceive this to be the most significant aspect of Rabelais and his World. Ivanov (1976) links Bakhtin’s discovery of the importance of binary oppositions with the work of Lévi-Strauss:

the books by Bakhtin and Lévi-Strauss have much in common in their treatment of the functioning of oppositions in the ritual or the carnival which can be traced back historically to ritual performance. For Lévi-Strauss the chief purpose of the ritual and the myth is the discovery of an intermediate link between the members of a binary opposition: a process known as mediation. The structural analysis of the ambivalence inherent in the ‘marketplace word’ and its corresponding imagery led Bakhtin to the conclusion (made independently from and prior to structural mythology) that the ‘carnival image strives to embrace and unite in itself both terminal points of the process of becoming or both members of the antitheses: birth–death, youth–age, top–bottom, face–lower bodily stratum, praise–abuse’ [Bakhtin 1968: 238]. From this standpoint, Bakhtin scrutinized various forms of inverted relations between top and bottom ‘a reversal of the hierarchy of top and bottom’ [Bakhtin 1968: 81] which takes place during carnival.

(Ivanov 1976: 35)

The convergence of Bakhtin’s thinking and that of current symbolic anthropology is highly significant. . . . We may note, for instance, the similarity of Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalesque high/low inversion to the concepts developed in The Reversible World, a collection of essays on anthropology and literature edited by Barbara Babcock. Although apparently unaware of Bakhtin’s study she assembles a range of writing on ‘symbolic inversion and cultural negation’ which puts carnival into a much wider perspective. She writes:

‘Symbolic inversion’ may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political.

(Babcock 1978: 14)

This is what we refer to . . . as ‘transgression’ (though there is another, more complex use of the term which arises in connection with extremist practices of modern art and philosophy; these designate not just the infracion of binary structures, but movement into an absolutely negative space beyond the structure of significance itself). For the moment it is enough to suggest that, in our view, the current widespread adoption of the idea of carnival as an analytic category can only be fruitful if it is displaced into the broader concept of symbolic inversion and transgression.

This is not to deny the usefulness of the carnivalesque as a sort of ‘modeling,’ at once utopian and counter-hegemonic, whereby it is viewed, in Roberto da Matta’s words, as a privileged locus of inversion. In his attempt to go beyond Bakhtin’s nostalgic and over-optimistic view of carnival, Matta acknowledges the degree to which festivity is licensed release, but he also praises its deep modeling of a different, pleasurable and communal ideal ‘of the people,’ even if that ideal cannot immediately be acted upon. . . . In this perspective the carnivalesque becomes a resource: of action, images and roles which may be invoked both to model and legitimate desire and to ‘degrade all that is spiritual and abstract.’ ‘The cheerful vulgarity of the powerless is used as a weapon against the pretence and hypocrisy of the powerful’ [Stamm 1982: 47]. In a most engaging description of this utopian/critical role of carnival Stamm continues:

On the positive side, carnival suggests the joyful affirmation of becoming. It is ecstatic collectivity, the superseding of the individuating principle in what Nietzsche called ‘the glowing life of Dionysian revellers.’ On the negative, critical side, the carnivalesque suggests a demystificatory instrument for everything in the social formation which renders such collectivity difficult of access: class hierarchy, political manipulation, sexual repression, dogmatism and paranoia. Carnival in this sense implies an attitude of creative disrespect, a radical opposition to the illegitimately powerful, to the morose and monological.

(Stamm 1982: 55)

Refreshinglly iconoclastic, this nevertheless resolves none of the problems raised so far concerning the politics of carnival: its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’ – in a process of displaced objection); its failure to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity.
In fact those writers and critics who remain purely within the celebratory terms of Bakhtin’s formulation are unable to resolve these key dilemmas. It is only by completely shifting the grounds of the debate, by transforming the ‘problematic’ of carnival, that these issues can be solved. . . . We have chosen therefore to consider carnival as one instance of a generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure. The symbolic categories of grotesque realism which Bakhtin located can be rediscovered as a governing dynamic of the body, the household, the city, the nation-state—indeed a vast range of interconnected domains.

Marcel Détienne puts a similar notion most persuasively in Dionysos Slain:

A system of thought . . . is founded on a series of acts of partition whose ambiguity, here as elsewhere, is to open up the terrain of their possible transgression at the very moment when they mark off a limit. To discover the complete horizon of a society’s symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgressions, its deviants.

(Détienne 1979: ix)

By tracking the ‘grotesque body’ and the ‘low-Other’ through different symbolic domains of bourgeois society since the Renaissance we can attain an unusual perspective upon its inner dynamics, the inner complicity of disgust and desire which fuels its crises of value. For the classificatory body of a culture is always double, always structured in relation to its negation, its inverse. ‘All symbolic inversions define a culture’s lineaments at the same time as they question the usefulness and the absoluteness of its ordering’ (Babcock 1978: 29). Indeed by attending to the low and the marginal we vindicate, on the terrain of European literary and cultural history, the more general anthropological assertion that the process of symbolic inversion, far from being a residual category of experience, is its very opposite. What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation, we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally.

(Babcock 1978: 32)

This is a scrupulously accurate and indispensable formulation. The carnival, the circus, the gypsy, the lumpenproletariat, play a symbolic role in bourgeois culture out of all proportion to their actual social importance. The dominant features of the psycho-symbolic domain cannot be mapped one-to-one onto the social formation. Thus ‘work,’ for example, which occupied such a central place in individual and collective life, is notoriously ‘under-represented’ in artistic forms . . . but this should not be ascribed to some willful act of ideological avoidance. Although work is ‘actually central’ in the production and reproduction of the whole social ensemble there is no reason,