Catherine Jones

St George's Eve Parade at the Dragon Cafe

Catherine Jones reflects on the joyous if fleeting experience of a spring carnival at the Dragon Café.

'We need now in the 21st century to give much more thought to how Dragon energy can be positive and transformative, if only we could learn how to harness it and help it to thrive.'
Sarah Wheeler, Creative Director of Mental Fight Club.

Walk south from London Bridge along Borough High Street and you will meet with a busy intersection surrounded by a commercial district of brown and grey office blocks. This hurried London encompasses the quiet island of St George the Martyr Church, an ancient site that has gradually been encroached upon by the ever-looming metropolis.

Yet this April, on the eve of St George's Day, a sudden flurry of colour and music burst out of the belly of the church, and a Dragon emerged with a troop of drums, singing and vibrantly costumed dancers. Anyone watching the church earlier that day would have suspected some sort of goings on, as people busily disappeared and re-emerged from the crypt, taking part in guided walks and creative workshops and in last minute preparation for the afternoon's parade.

The setting for our carnival is

Photo: Chris Knight

East meets west: dragon summit

well connected to the theme of St George, as is evident from various depictions of St George and the dragon hidden all around the area. The dragon symbol is also the inspiration behind the mental health initiative, Mental Fight Club, which operates from the group's own Dragon Café every Monday in the church crypt. The dragon motif is all the more captivating given

acrobatic performers from the Confucius Institute. After much applause, the gathering is invited back into the cosy underground crypt for an evening of folk music and talks on the numerous traditions that have inspired the Legend of St George and the Dragon.

It seems that almost as quickly as the excitement arises, all becomes still again

controlled, safe release of the tensions built up within hierarchical society which in turn helps to reaffirm the social order. Others highlight carnival as a fundamental form of popular culture, giving voice, body and agency to the people. There is also the view that the carnivalesque acts as a mechanism for renewal. Carnival's subversive traditions of inversion

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its striking prevalence in mythology, one that reaches right back into the depths of prehistory.

Quickly the Dragon is joined by tiny revellers and a small dragon brood, the entourage rapidly growing to include a female Robin Hood with Merry Men, and a Green Man and transgender Maid Marian, all cavorting along behind. A samba band begins to play and a Chinese dragon suddenly appears, gracefully sailing around Tabard St square to meet with our crypt-dwelling wyvern. Frenzied dancing ensues as the two dragons, accompanied by a battery from the brightly decorated players, encircle the church. Eventually, as the gathering begins to tire, we are wowed by Chinese

around the church, all that remains are a few colourful dragon scales being brushed about in the wind.

How quickly the liveliness dissolves and the area is reclaimed by the city's pallid hue. Can any significance be made of such a fleeting moment? Was it all quite inconsequential? Simply a pleasant day of revelry, patriotic celebration and publicity for the mental health charity. Could there be any more to it than that?

Many theorists of carnival maintain that these sorts of events serve a specific function in society. One 'safety-valve' theory contends that carnival is a time of catharsis for the workforce – 'rituals of rebellion' that allow for

and parody of the elite represent an alternative to the hierarchical world and so assist in society's transformative cycles. Yet others suggest that any such change today is ultimately sanctioned by the state and so is only ever assimilated into the existing order of society.

However, these conceptualisations are often critiqued, for the focus is restricted to dimensions of power. It conceives of those present as rather contingent on external forces and overlooks carnival's aesthetics and the people's collaborative and reflective impetus.

Cohen, looking at the development of Notting Hill Carnival up until 1992, argues that as art, culture

and politics are dynamically interrelated those present are predominantly active, conscious and often politically rebellious

Maid Marian

subjects. Yet even Cohen recognises the loss of Notting Hill's old-style 'organisation for the people and by the people.' He warns that 'it is likely to develop […] into a predominantly tourist-orientated show.'[1] Carnivals such as Notting Hill or Rio, like many large public events today, be it festivals, concerts or dance clubs, are often disparaged for having become commodified and dehumanised, most people no longer collaborating in

masses with yet another distraction; ultimately divorcing us from our capacity to construct our own reality.

However since the early 1990s there has been a growing phenomenon of carnivals appearing as conscious and celebratory protests in the form of unendorsed street parties or processions occupying public space.[2] Though there is a multitude of causes and campaigns, most are brought under the banner of 'carnivals against capitalism' in the global justice movement. Yet what of a localised event, such as the Dragon Parade? Protest carnivals are distinct in their explicitly oppositional rhetoric; their police presence; their attempts to disrupt the everyday and so interrupt state/corporate business. None of this was present during the St George and

us indistinguishable from such movements. Surely the improvised spontaneity of the day; the interaction, face-to-face contact, the collective and inclusive spirit, however transitory, embraced an act of defiance against the corporate monoculture?

Such a cross-cultural community as was seen that day – the organisers, the performers, the bystanders, the mentally well, unwell and recovering, the homeless, the academic, the student, the office worker, children after school and senior citizens – were *all* invited to dance, to cheer, to be spectators to each other. Surely all participated, transiently, in a levelling off of differences and identities in a way that echoes the egalitarian precepts of such protest carnivals.

For me, as a participant at the Dragon parade, engaging with one another creatively was a strategic assertion of human autonomy, self-definition, imagination and equality. The project's mix of creative and healing resilience, supporting people with sincere warmth and acceptance, has promoted the issue of mental health and the alienation and exclusion that epitomises it, and in turn has created a space for social inclusion. In addressing our society's prejudice, this makes a wider statement of empowerment for all.

The dragon symbol is inspiration behind the mental health initiative, Mental Fight Club

these cultural forms, but rather party to consumerism's passive spectatorship. In this way it can become easy to see carnival as just another apparatus in creating alienation and apathy; mollifying, homogenising and so depoliticising the

the Dragon and Maiden day parade. We certainly did not make any noticeable stand to the prevailing hegemony. Nevertheless our flamboyant costumes, dancing, our samba band, our banners, mascots and participatory ethos could at moments leave

A Bakhtinian perception adds

yet another connection when we are heedful of those who are mentally unwell. Bakhtin delineates medieval carnival as an anti-hierarchical, folk or market-place cultural

still adhere to the Early Renaissance attitudes that first opposed the 'aesthetics of the beautiful' to the folk grotesque. We are still uncomfortable with the

all the people.'[3] He posits that it was only during the later Romantic period that 'madness acquires a sombre, tragic aspect of individual isolation.' Nevertheless he affirms that madness is intrinsic to all forms of the grotesque because it 'makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by "normal", that is by commonplace ideas and judgments.'[4] Ultimately too if the Romantic grotesque instigates fear, Bahktin's folk carnival gives voice to the rude and real properties of ourselves that he affirms are communicated through a folk culture that is hence 'absolutely fearless'.[5] In this sense we can apprehend the sapience of giving 'madness' a voice in society and so insist on a confidence and pride towards those stepping out into public view when society claims they are incomplete, a boldness materialised at the Dragon Parade.

Photo: Chris Knight

Final pyramid

form. He conceived it as 'the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance' as it was they who still maintained the power to renew society through laughter and mockery of the elite. By humbling them through the imagery of the 'grotesque body' –the eating, defecating, copulating, natural body – they asserted their power of renewal though the expression of the 'grotesque' and its regenerative metaphor. This, he argues, is later lost and reduced to its bare crudities. Here I will simply highlight, as Bahktin does, that we

contradictory, blemished or incomplete. This is imperfect, and so ugly to us. We wish to hide it, we become fearful of it. Those with mental ill health are treated in just such a way.

Bahktin states that in the Middle Ages the 'unfinished' or 'grotesque' was not only associated with the hideous but also viewed positively, as it was ultimately a reflection of the cyclic changes of man's life and so the phases of nature. We had not quite become the modern, 'isolated biological individual […]the private, egoistic "economic man" but [still acknowledged…] the collective ancestral body of

But what of the Dragon Cafe carnivalists own understandings? Advocating a reinterpretation of the St George and the Dragon story, one that resounds with the charity's ethos towards mental illness, the creative director of Mental Fight Club, herself a sufferer of mental ill-health, explains that the dragon

*'is actually of universal human significance…
a dragon or serpent is*

universal to all cultures worldwide[...yet] the dragon in today's conventional telling of St George is seen as repellent and destructive [...] We have looked at the story and propose a retelling where we consider how the Dragon is pacified by the Power of the Feminine [after all St George on his own does not overcome the Dragon but it is only after the Maiden gives him her girdle, once tied around the dragons neck that it is subdued] and its

Baby dragons

newly peaceful form is full of creative potential! When St George slays it in front of the townspeople, he actually brings the story to a spiritual dead end, because the townspeople have not learnt to overcome their fear of the Dragon, and its enormous

creative potential.'

For those at the Dragon Café, losing one's fear of the dragon is synonymous with losing one's fear of 'the part of ourselves which we dare not face…' They maintain that

'Just like the dragon in the tale, repression and exclusion of this powerful part of ourselves is actually counter-productive. Our excluded dragon energy holds us to ransom [...] We can only be truly mentally well if we can learn to face our fears and understand that the inner resources to transform them live within each of us…'

I feel from this a deep sense of continuity. The Dragon, as an ubiquitous symbol of mankind's mythology, may stem from the earliest human cultures of the Palaeolithic over 100,000 years ago.[6] So in this sense when holding up the existing shape of ourselves against that which formed us we can learn to recognise our ancient arcane unanimity, the creative and cooperative part of our

humanity; our primeval dragon solidarity. Repression and exclusion of it will surely hold us and everything else on the planet to ransom.

The Dragon Café, as a regular gathering of some of the most disenfranchised in society, continually reminds us of our capacity to collaboratively shape and enhance our own lives. What more apt way to celebrate this than with a Dragon Parade. Far from being an inconsequential event, it seems to me that community self-celebration can help foreground our prejudices and our reclamations of agency and solidarity.

Notes

1. Cohen, A. 1993. *Masquerade Politics: explorations in the structure of urban cultural movements.* Oxford: Berg, p.153.

2. St John, G. 2005. Counter-tribes, global protests and carnivals of reclamation. *Peace Review* 16: 421-428

3. Bakhtin, M. 1984. *Rabelais and his world.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p.19.

4. Bakhtin, M. 1984, p.39.

5. Bakhtin, M. 1984, ibid.

6. Knight, C. 1991. *Blood Relations: menstruation and the Origins of Culture.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, pp.480-513.

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The Dragon Café materialises each Monday, from 11.30 am to 8.30 pm in the crypt of St George the Martyr Church, Borough, http://dragoncafe.co.uk/