

Contents

	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>ix</i>
1	From Carnavalesque to Ritualesque: Public Ritual and the Theater of the Street	
	<i>Jack Santino</i>	<i>3</i>
2	Locality, Spectacle, State Politics: Comparative Study of Carnival Traditions in Renaissance Nuremberg and Modern Trinidad	
	<i>Samuel Kinser</i>	<i>16</i>
3	Conflict Displays in the Black Atlantic	
	<i>Roger D. Abrahams</i>	<i>49</i>
4	Protesting and Grieving: Ritual, Politics, and the Effects of Scale	
	<i>Beverly J. Stoeltje</i>	<i>66</i>
5	Political Percussions: Cork Brass Bands and the Irish Revolution, 1914–1922	
	<i>John Borgonovo</i>	<i>93</i>
6	<i>¡Que Bonita Bandera!</i> Place, Space, and Identity as Expressed with the Puerto Rican Flag	
	<i>Elena Martínez</i>	<i>113</i>
7	The Lives of Processions in Bali and Lombok, Indonesia	
	<i>David Harnish</i>	<i>133</i>
8	The Anthropology of Festivals: Changes in Theory and Practice	
	<i>Laurent Sébastien Fournier</i>	<i>151</i>
9	The Politics of Cultural Promotion: The Umthetho Festival of Malawi's Northern Ngoni	
	<i>Lisa Gilman</i>	<i>164</i>

10	Music as Activist Spectacle: AIDS, Breast Cancer, and LGBT Choral Singing	<i>Pamela Moro</i>	189
11	The “Days of Scanzano”: The Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque in an Antinuclear Protest	<i>Dorothy L. Zinn</i>	205
12	“Some Are Born Green, Some Achieve Greenness”: Protest Theater and Environmental Activism	<i>Scott Magelsen</i>	222
13	The Material Culture of Remembrance in Ireland: Roadside Memorials as Contested Spaces	<i>Barbara Graham</i>	239
14	The Politics of Junk: Social Protest, “Outsider” Environments, and Ritualesque Display at the Heidelberg Project in Detroit	<i>Daniel Wojcik</i>	254
	<i>About the Authors</i>		278
	<i>Index</i>		283

From Carnavalesque to Ritualesque

Public Ritual and the Theater of the Street

Jack Santino

RITUAL, FESTIVAL, CELEBRATION, CARNIVAL, HOLIDAY, *public display event*—these terms and others are used to refer to a variety of public performances. Often the terms overlap. Sometimes they are used interchangeably. In part, this is due to the porous, shifting nature of the events themselves, heavily dependent on context and intended purpose. It is the intention of this essay to examine public performances in order to tease out shared qualities and to set forth ways of apprehending these events in a way that allows us to more fully grasp their purposeful meanings and to articulate ways that they differ. By approaching performance events as carnivalesque and ritualesque, we are able to understand the multiple modes of communication; the simultaneity of joy and anger, of politics and fun; and how “fun” in some contexts equals protest.

Carnival, strictly speaking, refers to the pre-Lenten festival that represents an opportunity for sensual abandon in advance of the deprivations of the forty-day period of Lent. This festive occasion is known in several guises and in fact sometimes occurs outside of reference to the Western Christian church calendar: for instance, Fastnacht is celebrated in some Protestant areas after Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent (Tokofsky 2004); and as European colonizers and settlers brought the tradition with them to the New World, it became heavily synthesized with African masquerade traditions, resulting in a New World Afro-Caribbean and South American carnival complex. As West Indian populations in turn migrated to North America and Europe, Trinidadian-style carnival is often celebrated in summer in these new locations (Allen 1999). No longer tied to a Christian calendar and heavily Africanized, these Trinidad- and Rio-styled



Figure 1.1. Carnival at Dunkirk, France, 2011

performances are being taken up in Europe. In any case, however, carnival refers to celebrations of great abandon, social inversion, public excess, sensuality, and the temporary establishment of an alternate society, one free of or even in opposition to the norm.

Ritual, conversely, in its true sense of “sacred ceremony,” is about constructing and reinforcing social categories, even if those categories represent a minority position or a marginalized group. Rites of passage are the means by which individuals and groups transition from one category to another. The categories in question are usually culturally constructed, for example, “husband,” “wife,” “president,” and so on. Even those rites associated with physical and biological realities, such as birth, puberty, or death, are contained deeply within webs of cultural meaning, having to do with perceptions of an afterlife, the presence or absence of beliefs concerning the world of the supernatural, and the nature of the universe. Death, it would seem, is death. But is there a concept of the soul? If so, when does it take leave of the body? In Roman Catholic ritual, a person’s soul requires the rituals of the church to usher it into the other world, possibly as late as three days after the physical death. Even something as apparently objective as the onset of puberty is seen to vary across cultures. Thus, ritual constructs and validates the very categories it deals in.

Because it is the way society validates its fundamental categories, ritual is the means for creating and reinforcing power structures, as presidential inaugurations, the installation of queens, or a commencement exercise demonstrate. Ritual is symbolic in nature but felt to be very real by those who are engaged with it; thus, among the transformations that ritual accomplishes, it is a means by which social categories are made real. Ritual actions are thought to have real power; ritual is instrumental, not expressive. As John MacAloon would say, that which occurs in ritual is thought to be real and to partake of unquestionable truths (MacAloon 1984; see

also Rappaport 1999). Ritual, then, is instrumental symbolic behavior. The transformations accomplished by ritual are essentially permanent.

Carnival, by contrast, remains expressive rather than instrumental. It is a temporary period. The understanding is that after the world is turned upside down, it will be turned right side up again. Carnival very often features parody and social critique, but the carnival frame remains expressive. Again following MacAloon, the carnival frame says: "Everything that happens here is fun and temporary, without lasting effect."

However, these terms—*carnival* and *ritual*—are idealized constructions. Carnival often leads to riot, as seen from sixteenth-century Rome to 1970s Notting Hill in London. (LeRoy Ladurie 1979; Cohen 1993). Moreover, festive celebrations often serve as rites of season, and a great many sacred ceremonies the world over are very merry and inversive. Finally, a great many events, such as Jonkonnu or the medieval Feast of Fools, fall outside of the Lent-Easter calendrical restrictions, yet seem to be carnivals in their own right.

Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the "carnavalesque" has allowed us to move beyond generic essentialism to understand elements or dimensions of public events as sharing certain characteristics (1984). We identify the carnivalesque in Pride Day celebrations, in spontaneous street celebrations following sports victories, or in protest rallies.

The distinction between ritual and festival (carnival has been called the festival par excellence; Falassi 2004, 71), then, is blurred and porous. Sometimes an event is distinctly one or the other. Often it is a little bit of both. This problematic is due at least in part to the shared use of standardized symbolic frames (certain ways of marking time or space), kinetics (parades, dances, house visitations), sound (noise, rough music, song, chants), and so on. However, we can develop a way of viewing symbolic public events as partaking more or less in the carnivalesque and/or the ritualesque. Thus, we can get past the absolutism and essentialism of assuming or assigning a single type of communication according to genre: for example, if it is ritual (understood as such by the participants), it is sacred; therefore, it is perceived as sacred by the participants in all its aspects (see MacAloon 1984). Most events will have elements of the ritualesque along with the carnivalesque, and the latter does not negate the former. The two are not antithetical, and the genre frames are multivocal. In the ongoing spontaneity of real-time enactments, public performances can signify many things at once.

Yet another important consideration when examining symbolic public events is the question of instrumentality versus expressivity. Ritual can be

said to be public symbolic action that is thought to be instrumental—it is done primarily to make something happen. Transformation and transcendence are typically associated with ritual; rituals rely on some sense of transcendent authority in order to accomplish the change, whether that is a rite of passage of the life cycle, a religious service, a healing ceremony, or a commencement exercise. The “ritualesque” refers to those aspects of a symbolic event that are meant to lead to extra-ceremonial change, or transformation. Events such as Halloween celebrations or carnivals are clearly expressive and festive, but will also have ritualesque elements of social critique and political parody. Other events, such as the Parisian *manifestations*, are primarily intended to bring about social change, and yet they contain carnivalesque elements of costume, music, and inversion. As ritual transformations are meant to continue after the ritual is completed, ritualesque actions are those that are intended to have a permanent effect on society. Ritualesque events aim for change beyond the “time out of time” of the event itself. This ritualesque dimension is not in opposition to the carnivalesque; indeed, it is often with carnivalesque events (such as Pride Day) that the ritualesque is constructed.

We need this concept of the ritualesque to sharpen our understanding of public festivity. When the Halloween masquerade is over, the rules and norms of everyday life are expected by most to resume. But when Earth Day or Pride Day or a Take Back the Night march is over, participants hope they have made a difference in that everyday world.

MATERIAL CULTURE

A through-line in public display events and/or street theater at the folk and popular levels of organization is the claiming of public space by people not in any official way authorized to do so. When one erects a cross on the highway to commemorate a fatality, this is a popular usage—that is, something done by “the people.” I am not referring here to official memorials, but rather the self-motivated, self-generated shrines that emerged as a ritual of mourning violent, untimely death in the latter decades of the twentieth century. If such a shrine is created at the entrance to a fast food restaurant or a commercial shopping center, the proprietors might fear that the shrine will discourage customers. Likewise, local and state governments wrestle with the increase in roadside shrines and memorials, some banning them outright, others turning a blind eye, and still others trying to accommodate them in some way (Everett 2002). Here, issues of traffic safety are said to be paramount.



Figure 1.2. Padlocks on the Pont Echevren behind Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris

We see in these examples uses of public space (or, if privately owned, space that is publicly accessed and used repeatedly by members of the public) in ways that the owners or the proprietary officials have not sanctioned. In short, people reclaim public space in order to use it symbolically and ritualistically, to make public statements in their own terms. Very often the space is not neutral; it may have important cultural associations of its own (for example, the use of the Place de la Bastille in Paris as a staging site for *les manifestations*), or it may have been rendered numinous, powerful, and sacred by more recent events that have occurred there, such as is the case of the Charlie Hebdo offices.

An interesting example of this contestation of public space can be seen in the padlock phenomenon that appears to be sweeping the world (I first encountered it in Kemerovo, Siberia). Paris has become noted for the padlocks along the Pont des Arts over the Seine, in front of the Louvre. The custom is for couples to place a lock, often inscribed with their names, on the bridge, then toss the key into the river. The lock represents a permanent relationship. When I first saw these in 2010, on the Pont des Arts and also the nearby Pont Echevren, there were frequent official announcements that the locks must be taken down. Supposedly, city officials did in fact cut locks off the bridges on several occasions. By 2014, however, not only had the custom continued to grow in popularity, the number of locks was now voluminous. Locks were attached to other locks, several inches thick. In February 2015, a panel on the Pont des Arts collapsed from the weight and was removed. Finally, in June 2015, the City of Paris removed all the padlocks from the Pont des Arts, though not from the Pont Echevren, saying that the weight of them threatened the structural integrity of the bridge.

As in the case of roadside crosses, the rationale of safety very well may be the immediate impetus for the removal of the padlocks. But as I stated, they had been viewed as problematic by city officials long before

they reached the point of danger to the bridge. I see here again a popular custom—that is, an emergent tradition of everyday people, in which public space is claimed as available for unofficial actions and communications and for uses unintended by the officials. And here again, this is met with resistance from the authorities, who eventually suppress the activity and reinforce their own control.

The padlocks are most often found at liminal spaces, such as bridges or other places overlooking a body of water. Very often it would appear that the view available, suitably romantic, is the significant factor in the choice of location. In Paris, for example, on a bridge near Notre Dame, only the side facing the cathedral is covered with the padlocks.

The padlocks are also interesting because they differ from many other forms of public display activities that also involve people personally but anonymously leaving signs of their participation, their presence. I am reminded of rag trees and rag wells in Ireland, Scotland, and other places; the spontaneous shrines mentioned above; cairns of stones in Jewish death traditions, and so on. In these cases, the rituals and symbols address serious problems—death and sickness (rag trees and rag wells are primarily sites of healing). The locks reference love. In all instances, however, we see the materialization of hope and the theatricalization of intention (as ritual). As with most votive offerings, the action represents a desired future condition. The objects bear witness to actions intended to influence the future. The padlocks suggest the intention and the hope for permanence, and in that sense they are positive, not negative. They are a form of true popular culture—not popular culture as created by the corporate-owned and corporate-controlled mass media. They are actions and customs initiated and understood by everyday people—and as such, are viewed suspiciously by authorities.

CARNIVALS OF GRIEF

Spontaneous shrines, which have become an international phenomenon, represent the development of a mourning practice from folk precedents. Decorative gravesite elaboration is well known and ancient in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Most likely Catholic Spanish colonizers, soldiers, and priests brought with them to the New World the custom of marking deaths that occurred on the roads with crosses. The custom has flourished in the American Southwest, Mexico, and Central America among peoples of Spanish, Anglo, and Native ancestries ever since. Roadside crosses, or other items such as flowers and messages, have become an all-too-common sight on the highways of the United States.

It was perhaps with the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, DC, that people began to evolve the custom to contexts beyond road fatalities. While no one either died or is buried at this site, the monument is not unlike a massive gravestone—slabs of granite inscribed with the names of the deceased. Its design was groundbreaking for war memorials, among other reasons because it lists the name of every person killed, in chronological order. Conventions of military hierarchy were not primary concerns. Also, many of the deceased were lost in battle, their bodies never recovered. For whatever reasons, the memorial has become a site of personal grieving, as individuals leave tokens of significance to them and to the deceased at the wall (see Haas 1998).

As in the case of highway memorials, this type of ritual is different from the grieving traditions engaged in by families and friends at home or in churches, mosques, synagogues, and other sacred places; these are acts that are simultaneously public and personal; anyone visiting the National Mall or driving on an interstate highway may see and comprehend the assemblages that have been created, but the individuals who created them remain anonymous. This reflects and communicates the nature of the deaths involved: violent, untimely, and related to reasons that may have been avoided. There is controversy regarding the Vietnam War; highway deaths sometimes signal unsafe roads or drunk driving. The resultant shrines and commemorative assemblages, then, both address these social issues and commemorate the deceased. They are performative commemoratives; their performativity is like a performative utterance (Austin 1962); they are active social forces themselves. The shrines are meant to have an effect, make a difference, cause a result. Thus, they are not only expressive (of love, of grief), they are also instrumental. And as instrumental symbolic creations, they are very like formal ritual (Santino 2006).

I was in Paris in 2015, three weeks after the attacks and killings at the Charlie Hebdo offices. I was in the city in part to witness the Paris *boeuf gras* carnival, which has been revived in recent years. The procession led to the Place de la République, a plaza central both geographically and symbolically. The mass manifestation on the Sunday following the Charlie Hebdo killings was centered there. I saw that the statue of Marianne, the national symbol of France, was covered with memorabilia dedicated to the Charlie Hebdo victims, along with calls for *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*. Not only was the monument itself covered with flowers and wreaths; it was written upon directly in ways that signaled how extraordinary the occasion was. I noticed that some candles were lit, and while I was there a woman brought a wreath. It was still an active site of mourning, weeks after the event. People were

writing—with paint—on the plaza itself. The entire plaza had become a canvas for displays of mourning, celebrations of freedom of expression, and demonstrations of solidarity.

The next day I took the Métro to the Charlie Hebdo headquarters. Upon leaving the station a few blocks from the offices, I saw that both sides of the boulevard had extensive shrines. One was dedicated to Ahmed Merabet, the Muslim police officer who was killed in the attack. The phrase “Je suis Charlie” had become a primary semantic component of the collective responses; here, the handmade signs read, “Je suis Ahmet.”

The offices themselves were under armed guard, and pedestrians were not allowed to approach. However, the end of the short street, which ended in a T intersection with another, was covered with shrine memorabilia. Because the people at the newspaper had been killed for their drawings of the Prophet Muhammad, the pencil (or pen) had emerged as a primary symbol. Pencils—real pencils, replica pencils, inflatable pencils, drawings of pencils—were the fundamental building blocks of these symbolic statements.

In this context I want to draw attention to such organic emergence of symbols specific to the occasions. In late 2014 and early 2015, the United States was roiled by police killings of unarmed African American men. In many cases police officers were not found to be guilty of any wrongdoing. As these situations seemed to occur with increasing frequency, African American communities took to the streets to protest. Violence erupted. And again, we saw the emergence of primary symbols of protest rooted to the specific events in question—“Hands up—don’t shoot,” supposedly said by the victim (Michael Brown), led to the subsequent use of hands—real or pictured—in reference to those words, to chants of; “I can’t breathe,” as said by Eric Garner as he choked to death. Here we can see how protests rely on traditional paradigms (processions, effigies, rough music, etc.) and simultaneously involve emergent, situationally specific symbolic language.

At Charlie Hebdo central, I was struck not only by the pencils, but also by the very riot of objects, symbols, concepts referenced, and messages expressed, as well as by the multitude of media used for these expressions. People had covered the official street name signs with official-looking imitations that read, “Place de la Liberté d’Expression.” Official bouquets and banners from the mayors of Paris and New York, ambassadors, and an international array of journalists were intermingled with handmade signs, cartoons, flowers, candles (many of them still lit at this time) and, of course, pencils. I found it all very moving. There were several people there, and conversations began easily. People from Paris and other parts of France were intrigued and I think impressed that I, an American professor, was there to



Figure 1.3. Pencils and pens at the Charlie Hebdo office



Figure 1.4. The image of the pencil accompanies this message at Charlie Hebdo: “The Republic is stronger than hatred.”

pay witness. There was a kind of liminality and *communitas* present, both in the democratic *mélange* of the objects and items and among the people present (how people would have responded if a Muslim had been present, I cannot say). Certainly there was a popular use of public space, and with the street signs especially, a usurpation of official hegemony. As was shown in the United States after the events of September 11, 2001, liminality and *communitas* are not exclusively limited to festive events.

In her essay in this volume, Beverly Stoeltje cites Barbara Babcock (1978, 297), who describes carnivals as a “surplus of signifiers.” That was what I experienced on the streets of Paris that day, a riot of color and texture—objects, images drawn and photographed, the smell of candles and flowers, all with individual meanings, intentions, and cultural associations. But carnivals are festive events: ludic, popularly associated with joyful effervescence. This space was sacred and solemn—a carnival of grief.

THE CARNAVALESQUE AND THE RITUALESQUE

Carnivals, properly speaking, may not always be such happy events. Most certainly the license of carnival allows for and even encourages the expression of forbidden sentiments, including the political. The paradox

of festive license, of course, is that it is sanctioned by the entrenched authorities. License is limited, and at times those limits are contested (Fabre 2007). Carnavalesque political parody can be very pointed, but must not spur actual direct action or be seen to spur direct action, or it will be curtailed or violently suppressed. Yet some carnivals do lead to revolts (Bercé 1977; LeRoy Ladurie 1979); and some public protests utilize traditional frames found in festivals to address and express grief, grievance, and outrage. As stated above, roughly coterminous with the Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris, the United States was dealing with people taking their grief and grievances with their police forces to the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland. Certainly the participants in those protests would never refer to their actions as carnivals in any sense, but we can see in them a kind of darker carnival, as people claim their own streets, chant, burn effigies, parade, and sometimes destroy commercial property as a sign of their rejection of the status quo. Perhaps it is possible to view such events as points on a continuum, with these being assigned a position toward the ritualesque pole. The events referred to here as “carnivals of grief” are intended to have immediate and long-term effects on society. They are not contained within a frame of carnivalesque parody or of permitted, tolerated license, after which the world is turn right side up again.

This is the distinction I wish to draw between carnivalesque and ritualesque: that which occurs within carnival and festival is allowed because the liminal frame is understood as social permission to defy the norms. These norms will be safely returned to—at least, that is the social bargain. For this reason researchers have often seen carnival as a social safety valve that allows participants to express deviant behavior occasionally so as to enable them to tolerate the normative rules otherwise. The ritualesque, as I see it, refers to those actions that are intended to have direct effects and consequences that will be maintained after the event itself is a memory. I am referring here to symbolic actions, undertaken with the intention of making a difference, causing a change. Ritual, as sacred ceremony, is the agent of transformation—rites of passage most famously, as well as healing rituals, religious ceremonies, and so on. Ritual is symbolic action that is considered by its adherents to be instrumental, not merely expressive. Likewise, the events that I am referring to as “ritualesque” are symbolic public actions that are enacted to cause social change, not merely performed as ends in themselves. A protest demonstration, a rally for a candidate, or the placing of a memorial at the site of a traffic fatality where alcohol was involved are all examples of ritualesque actions.



Figure 1.5. Young female, black participant embodies resistance at a *manifestation* in Paris, 2011

“Carnavalesque” and “ritualesque” are not oppositional terms. Carnival is capacious and may frequently include ritualesque dimensions. Likewise, ritualesque events often use carnalesque elements to make their point, as in a Gay Pride celebration. The point is to distinguish these two aspects of public display, not to suggest that they are oppositional. Quite the opposite is true. The carnalesque is often, but not necessarily, put to ritualesque purposes.

PROCESSION

Spontaneous shrines, rag wells, healing shrines, padlock bridges—all are forms of public ritualesque activities of which the focus is material culture. The material culture is stationary; the spectators come and go. Procession has its own special properties. Here, the spectators are more or less stationary, while the procession passes by (Ashley 2001). In all cases of processions, public ritual, public votive offerings, and so on, it is important to do something, to be seen doing something, and to see evidence that something has been done. The visual and the performative are combined in these kinds of cultural actions. If one is participating in a parade, march, or procession, it is a journey with a specific route (often past significant sites to the purpose of the march) and a specific beginning and endpoint. If one is a spectator, one experiences the passing of the parade in a manner that may be intended to be understood narratively: Who leads the parade? How are the elements distributed throughout? Who or what culminates it? (Ashley 2001; see also Twycross 1996). Here, the moving through territory is of paramount importance. In Northern Ireland, for instance, parades are often viewed—and objected to—as “triumphal” occasions, claiming territory as British, though this is invariably denied by those who organize the parades.

* * *

While I acknowledge the innate and contextual differences of the many examples cited throughout this essay, at one level they all share a political dimension in that they all involve the taking, claiming, and use of public space as a right, an act of popular sovereignty and agency, regardless of the specific discourse, which may be thought to be apolitical by those expressing it. Often the event is for purely festive purposes, as when people flood the streets to celebrate a sports victory. Other times, these popular events share the basic trait of rituals—the use of expressive, symbolic activity to achieve instrumental ends. Many of these may not be sacred ceremonies per se, but share these characteristics as ritualesque occasions. Equally, certain events will share the characteristics of carnival, including inversion, mocking authority or ignoring it altogether, or celebrating taboo subjects. These dynamics may or may not be directly applied to social change. Often identifying the carnivalesque elements obscures the ritualesque qualities of an event (here again, I point to Pride Day celebrations; see also Bercé 1977, 65). Thus we move from a carnival/ritual binary to a continuum ranging from the carnivalesque to the ritualesque as a means of apprehending and comprehending the multiple modes of communication—hidden transcripts, anger masked as fun—used in public performances (Scott 1992). In doing so, we wish to acknowledge and respect peoples' serious intentions expressed in festivity and play.

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