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Banquets, blasphemy, and grotesque bodies: Carnivalesque forms in biopolitical media activism

Even though the term "media activism" is often used to exclusively refer to the tactical media movement of the 1990s (Garcia & Lovink 1997), contemporary media activism has in fact an extraordinarily rich history. Although research on this subject is limited, it is possible to identify media of resistance in every epoch of media history, or indeed to approach media history principally as a history of media of resistance. In their works on the carnival culture of medieval and early modern Europe, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), Rolf Johannsmeier (1984), and Piero Camporesi (1994) describe a wealth of forms of such media. They describe the cultures of carnival as a sophisticated and profoundly political range of counter cultural forms with a surprising capacity of sidestepping any kind of censorship. As today's media activists turn away from the paradigm of disembodied information (as exemplified by Barlow 1996), recognizing the relevance of bodies and moving into the heart of biopolitics, this research becomes highly relevant in understanding current forms of activism. It makes it possible to research this activism as part of a much larger media history of resistance, thus allowing us to move beyond the limitations of the "presentism" (Mitchell & Hansen 2010) that has affected much of the research on new media activism. The paper will investigate actions by groups such as *ubermorgen.com, Les Liens invisibles* and the *Yes Men* from this perspective, testing the hypothesis that the carnivalesque forms described by the above authors make it possible to contribute towards a better historical understanding of activist media, and indeed towards a media history conceived of as a history of resistance.

1. Media Activism

Very often, media activism understood as equivalent to "tactical media". Tactical media were defined by Lovink (2005) as media that "appear, strike, and disappear" like a guerilla does. They are tactical in the meaning Michel de Certeau attributes to the term: in *Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau 1988) he describes as tactical actions those actions that have no place of their own and no strong calculus, but that instead are opportunistic and time-based. This understanding of activist media as tactical media has dominated theory and practice especially in the nineteen-nineties and the early zeros. In my research, I aim to develop a historical perspective and understand activist media as media of disobedience, as media that surface in unregulated areas of the public sphere and introduce discontinuities in dominant discourses; media that do the unexpected, that disrupt, disturb, even sabotage. Such media were present in all epochs of media history, from the graffiti of antiquity, to the buffoons, singers, tricksters and jesters of the Middle Ages, to protest pamphlets in early modernity, hacktivism and current locative and biopolitical media. By adopting a historical perspective, I refuse to answer the question "Where do you want to go today" asked by Microsoft in the nineteen-ninetees and instead try to say something how we came to be where we are and what that means in terms of an emancipatory approach to media. In this paper I will try to do so by focusing on some selected media actions in the context of biopolitical media activism and contextualize it by relating it to bodily forms in European carnival culture, such as described by Mikail Bakhtin in his book on Rabelais (Bakhtin 1984), which in German translation has the subtitle "popular culture as counter culture" (Bachtin 1995).

2. Bakhtin and Carneval Culture

The popular cultures of the Middle Ages and early modernity have proven to be an exceptionally rich subject of research that attracted great minds such as Umberto Eco's, Peter Burke's (1978), and Piero Camporesi's (1994). In 2000, Claudia Giannetti published an essay in which she explores the relevance of Bakhtin's work for what she called the aesthetics of intercommunication, showing how various artists were making use of the carnivalesque aesthetics in their work. But according the Renate Lachmann, Bakhtin's German editor, the current relevance of Mikail Bakhtin's study of François Rabelais lies well beyond these aesthetic aspects: It is, in fact, a reading of the culture of laughter a counterculture, as indicated in the German subtitle of the book. The carnival culture is understood as an inversion of the prevailing order; a challenge to the ruling elites in Rabelais'

period in which is contained a universalization of the culture of laughter that makes it relevant for the historical reality in which Bakhtin lives and works: the 1930s Soviet Union ruled by Stalin, where Bakhtin's study questions Stalin's homogenization of politics and culture, the purges, the increasing strangling of the Russian avantgarde by the workings of a monolithic censorship. Because according to Bakhtin laughter is universal it is also ambivalent, and thus censorable only at the price of being ludicrous to the point of being tragic (some years ago, at Houston airport passengers were reminded that "joking about the security measures will lead to your arrest", Echavarría/Koppensteiner 2008).

3. The grotesque conception of the body

Bakhtin develops his entire argument around the bodily and material principles of life that form the guiding thread in Rabelais' work. He refers to the corresponding aesthetics as "grotesque realism". (Bakhtin 1984, 18) The inversion of the existing order involves privileging the bodily over the mental/spiritual spheres of existence, in a way that goes beyond a mere rehabilitation of the flesh after a supposedly anorexic medieval period. Grotesque realism understands the body as a principle that goes beyond the individual, and the grotesque body thus acts as a utopian and unifying principle within the cultural sphere. In a striking contrast to the modern conception of the body, the grotesque body defines a sphere of interconnectedness and dissolution of boundaries between what we have learned to call "individuals": "The material bodily principle is not contained in the biological individual, not in the bourgeiois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed." (Bakhtin 1984, 19) The body is thus not a self-contained, closed sheath; it is *open,* and it is the openings of the body and the things done with the opening that define the conception of the grotesque in Bakhtin: the devouring mouth, the defecating anus, the birthgiving vulva, the various bodily liquids, the process of death and rebirth, growth and decay, etc. – a continuum of flesh that Bakhtin describes as utopian because it transcends the boundaries of men and women in a material-bodily as well as in a social sense: inevitably, the bodily motives seem to outrun each other in their exaggerated, excessive, hyperbolic crudeness, their degradation of anything or anyone that has a claim to superiority, be it in the realm of society, or within the body itself, e.g. the superiority of the brain or eye over the lower body parts. At the very center of the cultural forms in Bakhtins analysis was the banquet: there is hardly a page in Gargantua and Panagruel on which there isn't a reference to the pleasures of eating, and that according to Bakhtin it contains "the longest list of foods of al world literature"

3. Body, information

If the grotesque body marks a subversive, non-censorable, utopian conception of the body before the body was individualized and sanitized in subsequent centuries of European history, how can the posthuman, the technological body be understood? The emergence of cyberspace as a social space first brought back bodylessness as a utopia: "this is not where bodies are" states the Declaration of independence of cyberspace (Barlow 1996) meaning tha in cyberspace we shed our bodies and their limitations, we cease to be pulled down: the sanitized body is followed by an body ideal of pure information. That ideal initially inspired various forms of hacktivism, for example, by providing the possibility to copy and endlessly multiply online identities and therefore create a crowd of protesters out of a handful of activist, as in DoS attacks. But the assumed disconnection between the physical, mortal body and information technology turned out to be of limited use for activists, a limitation that could be overcome by beginning to understand the body as a field of contestation, a contestation that had intensified precisely because of the availability of new technologies. By appropriating the concept of the cyborg, Donna Haraway and Chris Hables Gray began to develop a conception of the body that mirrored some of the characteristics of the grotesque body. The cyborg represented a body open to the technological sphere, blurring the boundary between the human and the machinic. Popular culture contested the technization of the body guided by military and corporate interests, a continuation of the sanitizing and rationalizing of the body initiated by modernity and described by Michel Foucault. Haraway and Gray considered cyborgization an emancipatory cultural-technological vision opposing what today we might call the secure, calculable, deathless conception of the body manifests in enormous investments into exorcizing death and decay from the body, ranging from anti-aging yogurts to aesthetic surgery and cryonic tanks. Artists like Stelarc and Steve Mann were at the forefront of conceptualizing the post-human body in their works.

4. Biopolitical activism

Even though cyborg culture challenged the dominant discourses around biotechnologies by contesting its theoretical and practical assumptions, they seem to have been infused with a certain deference vis-à-vis a technology and certainly did not laugh much, sharing to some extent the earnestness of the technology priests. Other activists ridiculed precisely this subservience, literally degrading the sacred, which was part of the inversion mechanism of the culture of laughing analyzed by Bakhtin, where false priests were as popular a theme as lavish banquets and bawdy rituals disguised as religious services.

Adopting a perfect Rabelaisian form inversion and blasphemy Critical Art Ensemble launched their project Cult of the New Eve in 1998, making fun of the quasi-religious sentiments surrounding genetic engineering: at last, this believe suggests, we are able to create our own creation, rather than being on the receiving end. According to CAE, given past atrocities and the historical connection of biotechnology with eugenics, the new biological initiative is represented in a rhetoric derived from utopian Christianity, focusing in particular on Eve, a powerful, easily recognizable symbol used by creationists and scientists researching the origin of humanity alike. And now, the Human Genome Project "has one last Eve for science to offer us. She is the one who will help the public understand the beginning of a second genesis-one that is not beholden to any reproductive boundaries that once separated the species—and to understnad it as a good thing. She is Eve without the fall—an Eve of perpetual grace ..." (CAE 1999).

Fig. 1: *Cult of the New Eve* by Critical Art Ensemble

Shortly thereafter, the Yesmen presented a new technology for controlling the bodies of workers in factories in the shape of an oversized terminal-penis worn around the waste, letting the lower part of the body take control like never before. Masked as representatives of the World Trade Organization, the activists tried to convince the attendees of a trade conference on "textiles of the future" that this technology would resolve the problem of "control over workers" as the "only problem still remaining with the efficiency of today's

sweatshops" (Yes Men 2001). The utopian character of the grotesque body, its openness to a world of equality, is directed here against the drudgery in the world's textile manufacturing plants, where textiles that only the affluent can afford are produced under the most unjust working conditions.

Fig. 2: Yes Men presenting the *Employee Visualization Appendage*

Google will eat Itself is a project by uebermorgen.com that works with a theme that might be the most prominent one in Bakhtin's reading Rabelais: the banquet. Here, the victory of bodily materialism vis-à-vis the cultural norms of privacy or asceticism is celebrated The Rabelaisian banquet as interpreted by Bakhtin is for everyone, and for everyone *alike:* the bodily materialism that dominates the banquet makes it impossible to maintain any social hierarchies. Unlike the private meal, where social hierarchies are displayed and reinforced, the banquet, is, quite literally, "for all the world" (Bakhtin 1984, 278). With the grotesque body as an open body, not even devouring and being devoured can be clearly separated, there occurs a "fusion of the devouring and devoured body" (Bakhtin 1984, 279).

Google will eat itself is such a banquet, it could be called a *Rabelaisian data banquet.* It is a site of utopian transgressions, of excess and of grotesquery, a site where the hierarchizing of knowledge, the claim to goodness and to truth that the search engine makes, is literally consumed, eaten, driven down into the lower strata of the body. Technically, it is a banquet fuelled by an endless stream of micropayments generated by the Google Adsense service. Adsense ads are placed on hidden websites, and the income is used to purchase Google shares. Google is eating its own output, it both devours and is devoured: a process that will be complete, according to uebermorgen.com, in 202.345.117, which is when Google will have eaten itself.
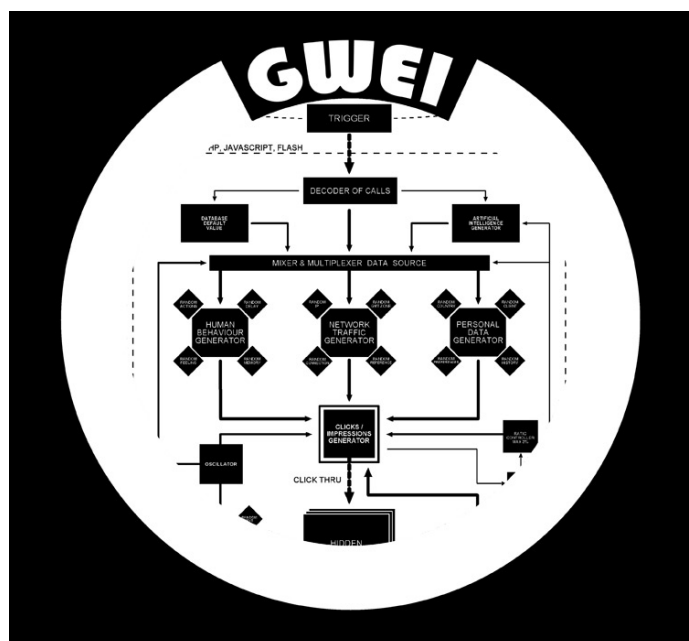
Fig. 3: *Google will eat itself* diagram by uebermorgen.com

Other activist projects such as the *Web 2.0 suicide machine* by moddr_ and *Seppukoo* by Liens Invisibles laugh about death and celebrate it as the better life. Again, in the carneval forms described by Rabelais, motives of dying and death play an important role. According to Bakhtin, "in Rabelais' novel the image of death is devoid of all tragic or terrifying overtones. Death is a necessary link in the process of people's growth and renewal. It is the 'other side' of birth." (Bakhtin 1984, 407) Death and laughter are not mutually exclusive; it was possible to laugh about death, so much so that "laughter and joy" were listed by Rabelais as major causes of death (ibid., 409). Thus, death is a passageway to this better life of "purely human relations", another utopian motive developed by Bakhtin throughout his book (ibid., 10). Laughing and joking about death was directed against the claims to eternity made by the church and the rulers. "Everything that is accomplished and seemingly eternal [...] is sent into a worldly and bodily hell, to experience death and rebirth (Bakhtin 1995, 415)."[1] As their websites indicate, these projects intend to celebrate the new life that is possible after the death of one's user profile, a fact that has not been appreciated by the owners of large social media platforms. In fact, once they laugh at the eternal life that the owners of social media platforms require of their users by making it impossible to permanently delete one's account. Far from a mere parody, the grotesque imagery of these activist projects, reflecting the early

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[1] This quote is from a paragraph missing in the English translation (Bakthin 1984, 371); this translation from the German by the autor.

carnivalesque forms described by Bakhtin, makes virtual suicide a "decisive political act" (Cox 2011), or, one might add, a decisive *biopoltical* act, for what is at stake is life itself.

5. Conclusion

The intention of this brief exploration of carnivalesque themes in current biopolitical media activism was not to show that aesthetic forms such as they are described by Bakhtin are immediately relevant to understanding contemporary forms of critique and resistance, this is easy to do and evident. What matters more is what the prevalence of these forms in activist media means for understanding and researching contemporary media in general. Here, it would point to a path of research that views biopolitics as a fruitful angle of investigation *because* it begins to look at media in terms of a media history of resistance, of disobedience, of subversion. With media studies being a young field of study, and research agendas yielding under the pressures of cognitive capitalism (Bifo), conducting such research does itself have an activist dimension by challenging knowledge as a commodity.

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