Aesthetic Activism and the Carnivalesque in the Urban Social Movements

Tijen Tunali [1,]
[1] Columbia Global Centers, Columbia University. E-Mail: tt2928@columbia.edu.

Abstract
This paper considers the ways in which changes and experimentations in the realm of aesthetics ,as well as in the new forms of political participation and representation in an era of global revolt, have resulted in a deep connection between the aesthetics and politics of civil disobedience, political activism and artistic representation. Specifically, the discussion is based on a comparative analysis of the urban activism of the *Carnival Against Capital* protests in London and Seattle, the Occupy Movement in New York, and the Gezi Park Movement in Turkey where the aesthetics of active participation represents a new kind of politicization—collective memory and language, sensual festivity and the forming of communitas—that goes beyond the conventional understanding of the convergence of politics and art.

The author focuses on the notable carnivalesque character in those protests—the costumes, the masks, the performances, the interventional tactics and the aesthetics of community building. Based on the theories of aesthetics and rebellion the paper proposes the concept of carnival aesthetics as the study of the sensuous and subversive experience of the multitude when marching, throwing slogans, battling with police forces behind the barricades, performing and dancing together on the streets. Here carnivalesque aesthetics are employed as a means to create diversity, creativity, decentralization, horizontality, egalitarianism and direct action—the political principles that are at the heart of the recent protests. The discussion demonstrates that while thriving authoritarianism depends on disciplined individuals and the crisis in democracy, carnival aesthetics during protests present radicalized social relations that are increasingly becoming the core of the current social, cultural and environmental struggles around the world.

Keywords
Aesthetics, art, activism, carnivalesque, social movements, urban space, tactical frivolity

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant surge in global protests challenging economic institutions and political norms. These movements, including the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, the anti-austerity campaigns across Europe, and the Gezi uprising in Turkey, all shared a common goal: to create a more horizontal, democratic, and inclusive arena for political expression. This contemporary struggle for democratic representation has not only defied conventional notions of aesthetics and politics but has also provided us with new analytical tools to question our relationship with power and politics in the public space (Tunali 2021). The innovative aesthetic-political endeavors emanating from the intersection of radical art and the practical activities of social movements repudiated the imperatives associated with conventional political representation paradigms. Instead, these actions called forth a unified popular consciousness that autonomously established its notions of justice and ethical communal bonds. Hence, it becomes imperative to adopt fresh perspectives to examine and grasp the potential of aesthetics as an integral visual, cultural, and political component of modern protests. This paper aims to contribute to this discourse by contending that the actions, performances, objects, and creative relationships have reclaimed urban spaces, shifting the age-old debate from what activist art communicates about politics to the inherently political nature of art itself. In the current era of worldwide uprisings, the aesthetic dimension of political engagement becomes instrumental in comprehending the political capabilities of the multitude—their abilities to perceive, act, and engage.

The discussion here concerns the aesthetics of the carnivalesque as an artistic expression of collectivity and as a conduit for the promotion of visibility, diversity, creativity, decentralization, horizontality, egalitarianism, and direct action—principles that have remained at the core of both carnival traditions and social movements since the 1970s. Additionally, it asserts that the ephemeral aesthetic encounters with these principles within protest spaces possess dual qualities of transgression and progressiveness. In this context, the notion of aesthetics transcends conventional associations with artworks. Instead, aesthetics is conceived as a domain that organizes and influences the sensory perceptions and sensitivities of individuals, facilitating the cultivation of a sensibility within subjects that has been stifled by prevailing aesthetic norms. Authentic political engagement commences when individuals begin to employ this newfound sensibility, thus transforming into political actors. Can this process of politicizing ordinary citizens and their reclamation of the political and aesthetic realms of visibility and discourse, which inherently belong to them, pave the way for genuine democratic representation and emancipation?

1.1. **Bakhtin's Carnival and Carnivalesque**

The anti-globalization movements of the 1990s and the first decade of the millennium embraced a leaderless, autonomous, spontaneous, horizontal, and directly democratic structure. This model, characterized by its rejection of hierarchical organization, found resonance in various forms of contemporary political activism, from the Chiapas mountains to Brazilian favelas, from the occupation of Spanish squares from Arab uprisings to the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement from Gezi Park Resistance to Extinction Rebellion and many other urban protests. These movements share a common objective: to be 'seen' and 'heard' by the power rather than to seize power. Despite being deemed unconventional, impractical, and untenable, these movements redefined the parameters of political engagement. Such social movements organized in resistance to neoliberalism, colonialism and authoritarianism have been a crucial source of knowledge and ideological formation for the generation of artists and activist alike.

From the early days of anti-globalization protests the power of art and aesthetics emerged as a potent means of challenging hierarchical social relations and advancing the cause of a more democratic society. Artistic struggles, including visual arts, performances, and aesthetic experiences assumed a pivotal role in conveying political messages, fostering solidarity, and subverting established norms. This paper analyses the collective aesthetic experience of the masses with the concept of carnival aesthetics as the study of the sensuous and subversive experience of the multitude when marching, throwing slogans, battling with police forces behind the barricades, and occupying squares and the streets. Indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the carnival and carnivalesque this paper offers a theoretical and visual analysis of the relationship between urban social movements and protest aesthetics by demonstrating how tactical aesthetics and reconfiguration of the aesthetic realm of politics constitute the politics of aesthetics of many urban social movements.

The concept of the carnival, rooted in the traditions of Roman Saturnalia and Greek Dionysia, has evolved into a significant element of contemporary activism. This essay explores the profound impact of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on the carnivalesque in shaping the aesthetics and politics of various social movements during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Bakhtin, a philosopher in the early twentieth century, challenged conventional Kantian aesthetics and redefined aesthetics as both the creative process and the artistic endeavor. The renowned work *Rabelais and His World* by Bakhtin has been extensively cited and embraced by activists, scholars, and theoreticians alike. Within this seminal work, Bakhtin dissects the societal role of the carnivalesque and the significance of grotesque symbolism, imagery, and language within the literary compositions of François Rabelais, a sixteenth-century writer. Following the English translation of Bakhtin's work in 1968, the elements of the carnivalesque gained prominence within social movements and uprisings seeking excess and heightened participation. Bakhtin's philosophy provided a theoretical framework that resonated with those challenging existing power structures. His critique of the prevailing societal structure, his elucidation of the concept of carnival as a mechanism for transcending the

exclusive constraints of political norms, and his delineation of joy and laughter as catalysts for revolutionary change garnered considerable admiration within activist circles. The carnival, as Bakhtin described it, offered a temporary escape from the constraints and pressures of the social order, fostering amicable relationships even among strangers and permitting forbidden excesses. This liberation from societal norms became a powerful tool in the arsenal of contemporary activists.

Bakhtin interprets the carnival as a popular avenue for subversion, an arena where the established power structures can be challenged, resisted, and inverted, effectively turning the world 'inside out.' His theoretical framework positions the carnival as a constituent of folkloric culture counter-posed to the rigid cultural norms of officialdom, a subversive spectacle confronting the structured constructs of discourse and visual representations. In the context of social movements, the carnivalesque emerges as a means of reconstituting existing boundaries and normative structures, thereby bestowing a liberating texture upon the very fabric of protests. The satire, the laughter, the costumes and masks, the dance, the theater and the performance disturb the existing sensual order and connect the subject to the other subjects in ways that the individual subject would not experience during the day-to-day social relations extant in the current capitalist system. With examples from around the world, the following pages will articulate how and why the carnivalesque aesthetics of the recent protests allows for an aesthetico-political experience where imagination, creativity and pleasure are embraced and celebrated as an integral and radicalizing force for the anti-capitalist mobilizations.

Several scholars have sought to elucidate the visual ambiance characterizing recent urban social movements by drawing upon Bakhtin's conceptualization of the carnival as a realm where the "world is turned upside down," resulting in the construction of "a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). However, it is important to note that these endeavors, while acknowledging the aesthetic qualities inherent to the carnivalesque atmosphere, primarily analyze it as a social domain rather than an aesthetic one. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the carnivalized politics underpinning these social movements, this paper places its focal point on the aesthetic attributes encompassing elements such as humor, dance, performance, attire, musical instruments, slogans, and symbols. These elements collectively facilitate the creation of perceptible interactions among protestors, a concept I refer to as 'carnivalesque aesthetics.' I contend that this form of aesthetic rebellion holds paramount significance, as it disrupts the sensory landscape of the urban environment as well as the customary allocation of temporal, spatial, and behavioral dimensions. Consequently, it engenders a rupture in the dominant framework governing social visibility, intellectual discourse and political action.

The conceptual framework formulated by Bakhtin regarding the carnivalesque holds a pivotal role in transcending established political norms. His profound emphasis on the power of joy and laughter as agents of revolution has had a lasting impact on contemporary activism. The emergence of leaderless, horizontally organized collectives and the shift towards prioritizing visibility over hierarchical power structures have fundamentally reshaped the landscape of political engagement. Furthermore, the incorporation of art and aesthetics into the fabric of the carnivalesque has made these elements essential for challenging entrenched hierarchies and striving for a more democratic societal model. Consequently, the interplay between the aesthetics and politics of the 'carnival of the oppressed' continues to shape the course of contemporary activism.

1.2. 'Carnival of the Oppressed' and the Politics of Visibility

Lenin once characterized socialism as the 'carnival of the oppressed.' In the context of contemporary protests, the concept of carnival must be understood as the festive gathering of a crowd—an immersive and subversive assembly imbued with a profoundly aesthetic political dimension. It represents the aesthetic encounter of multitudes, where disparate entities come together to celebrate the ideals of freedom, equality, and camaraderie among individuals. An illustrative example of this phenomenon is evident in the biennial inauguration of the World Social Forum, which has

commenced with a carnival-like procession since 2001. It is crucial to recognize that the transgressive, subversive, and sensory aspects of the carnivalesque experience, combined with the egalitarian and participatory nature of recent activism, serve as a bridge connecting the realms of political and aesthetic revolution.

In a comprehensive compilation featuring accounts from global activists engaged in anti-globalization protests, these individuals express a shared goal: "Through our unwavering commitment to the aesthetics of joy and desire, we aim to create a carnival-like space where conventional norms dissolve, and the realm of possibility knows no bounds. Our aspiration is to break down the barriers separating art from politics, participants from spectators, and dreams from actions" (Notes from Nowhere 2023, 27). Raoul Vaneigem, a significant figure of the 1968 Revolution and an active participant in the Situationist International, conveyed in his renowned work, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, that "Revolutionary movements are reminiscent of carnivals, where individual existence celebrates its integration into a rejuvenated society. (Vanageim 2012, 48). Vaneigem further elaborated on the fusion of carnivalesque artistic interventions with grassroots activism, emphasizing the transformative potential of such convergence: The Street Party can be read as a situ-esque rehearsal of this assertion; as an attempt to make Carnival the revolutionary moment. Placing what 'could be' in the path of 'what is' and celebrating the 'here and now' in the road for rush for 'there and later,' it hopes to reenergize the possibility of radical change (Quoted in John Jordan, 353).

The 'No Military Link Road' campaign, the carnivalesque occupation of Claremont Road in 1993, and the Reclaim the Streets protests in 1996 in London, prominently underscored their essence as exuberant street festivities. These events, both in theory and practice, served as profound sources of inspiration for analogous anti-globalization movements on a global scale. Within their promotional literature, anarchist activists deliberately asserted the seminal significance of these carnivalesque actions as precedents:

> The enormous popular festivals of the Bastille, the Paris Commune, Paris '68. From the Middle Ages onwards the carnival has offered glimpses of a world turned upside down, a topsy-turvy universe free of toil, suffering and inequality. Carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions (Reclaim the Streets flyer, 1996).

Following the occurrence of the *Carnival Against Capital*, colloquially referred to as Global Action Day or J-18, on the 18th of June 1999, a significant paradigm shift emerged within activist and artistic circles. The lexicons 'carnival of resistance' and 'carnival of the oppressed' swiftly gained prominence as vehicles to encapsulate and elucidate the multifaceted essence of the protests. Notably, the organizers of J-18 disclosed their production of an impressive nine thousand masks, the profound symbolism and import of which were meticulously expounded upon within the pages of their publication titled 'Do or Die':

> Those in authority fear the mask for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping and cataloging: in knowing who you are. But a Carnival needs masks, thousands of masks; and our masks are not to conceal our identity but to reveal it...The masquerade has always been an essential part of Carnival. Dressing up and disguise, the blurring of identities and boundaries, transformation, transgression; all are brought together in the wearing of masks. Masking up releases our commonality, enables us to act together, to shout as one to those who rule and divide us 'we are all fools, deviants, outcasts, clowns and criminals.' Today we shall give this resistance a face; for by putting on our masks we reveal our unity; and by raising our voices in the street together, we speak our anger at the facelessness of power. On the signal follow your color. Let the Carnival begin (*Do or Die*, 2000, 20).

Figure 1. Anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle, 1999. Source:www.democracyuprising.com/2004/Seattle1999/anti-globalization-movement "

The 'carnival of the oppressed' represents more than a mere expression of protest or direct action within the confines of urban global centers. Concurrently with the *Carnival Against Capital* in London, the indigenous communities residing in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria orchestrated their own carnival as a vehement response to imperialism and the hegemony of corporate interests. This grassroots movement was aimed at challenging the dominance of oil multinational corporations, which had wrought havoc upon the lives and environment of this ecologically diverse region. The Nigerian Carnival of the Oppressed was intricately linked to the J18 international day of action against global capitalism, forging a symbolic connection through the shared elements of carnival aesthetics, encompassing dance, drumming, and masquerade. The same is true with Subcomandante Marcos, the previous spokesperson for the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas Mexico who declared in 2003: "The Revolution, in its contemporary form, can no longer be envisioned through the lens of traditional socialist realism, where individuals stoically march behind a red flag towards an illuminated future. Instead, it has evolved into a vibrant carnival" (Quoted in Tunali 2015, 184).

In 1996 Zapatistas organized an 'intergalactic' meeting against neoliberalism, the seeds were planted for the international network called People's Global Action (PGA). People from more than forty countries gathered in La Realidad, one of the five *caracoles* (political centers) of the Zapatistas in the middle of the Lacandon Jungle. PGA was founded in February 1998 by a diverse group of people from

Figure 2. *Revolutionary Anarchist Clown Bloc* during the protests in Philadelphia in 2000. Photography anon. Open source.

social movements as diverse as Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST), Reclaim the Streets (RTS) in the UK, the Zapatistas in Mexico, radical ecologists from the Ukraine, Maori activist groups in New Zealand, and squatters from across Europe, all of whom had gathered in Geneva for the founding conference. The PGA Network was created as a tool for coordination and communication between groups, movements, and individuals wanting to organize global anti-capitalist resistance and to draw attention to the possibility of alternative forms of social organization. The PGA and the movements involved within it were instrumental in initiating and coordinating the global days of action against the G8 on its Birmingham, England, Summit, held in May of 1998, and the day of action in financial centers around the world, held on June 18, 1999, and since then is famously known as the *Carnival Against Capital*. The PGA also made the call for the historical 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. The international meeting in La Realidad, Chiapas, also culminated with the founding of the World Social Forum WSF in January 2001, in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Since then Every other year, the WSF with the motto A different **world** is possible" opens with a carnival-like march.

1.3. **Carnivalesque Aesthetics of Urban Protests**

During the 1990s and early 2000s, a period marked by widespread anti-globalization street protests worldwide, these common carnival elements not only provided a distinctive visual and sensory identity to these local movements but also served as a unifying force in the face of brutal police repression. This convergence contributed to their alignment with the broader urban social movements, fostering international grassroots solidarities.

The emergence of carnivalesque action groups, such as the Pink and Silver bloc, the *Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army* (C.I.R.C.A), *Tute Bianche* and *Revolutionary Anarchist Clown Bloc* played an undeniable catalytic role in events first in Reclaim the Streets protests then other anti-globalization

protests around the world. They adopted the guise of the clown persona, yet transcended the conventional realms of circus or theatrical presentation, effectively transposing it into the domain of protest spaces. These groups, through their innovative use of carnival costumes and masks, effectively confounded law enforcement and averted violent confrontations on the frontlines. Their deployment of unicycles, squeaky mallets, oversized footwear, and bewildering antics effectively bamboozled the police, leaving an indelible mark on the contemporary activist landscape (Figure 3). Rebellious clowns have continued to be visible in Extinction Rebellion protests across Great Britain up until today. However, it is noteworthy that CIRCA --the most meticulously organized among them dissolved in the year 2020. This event transpired subsequent to an exposé by the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, which disclosed that CIRCA had been subjected to covert police infiltration during the early 2000s. Notably, one undercover officer adopted the peculiar guise of a clown, undergoing rigorous training in this unconventional profession as a means to clandestinely penetrate the inner sanctums of the group (Marano 2020).

The young activist generation has embraced the carnival as a defining visual symbol. Giant puppets, effigies, drums, and individuals portraying a wide array of characters enthusiastically partake in these carnivalesque actions. The passing of effigies, drums, and musical instruments from one activist to another symbolizes the collective nature of this mobilization, a shared act of imagination. In some instances, puppets themselves double as masks or even function as makeshift gas masks. Thus, the carnival not only embodies the spirit of resistance but also exemplifies the power of collective creativity and expression. The employment of costumes and masks, the malleability of identities and personas, the farcical portrayal of violence, the pervasive use of satire and mirth, the invocation of the notion of inverted reality, and various other subversive manifestations of the carnivalesque ethos collectively disrupt the prevailing docility inherent in everyday existence. These elements, beyond serving as practical instruments for confounding law enforcement and erecting a psychological barrier against the specter of police brutality, constitute a deliberate display of carnival aesthetics. In doing so, protesters not only subvert the conventional modes of engagement with the state's armed apparatus but also shatter the established norms governing the boundaries of the perceptible and the reasonable. Queer imagery is especially common for its joyous, tactical and anarcho-punk elements "offering a radical visual, sonic and corporeal contrast to the agents of the state, whose own contradictions, hierarchy, violence and oppressive measures are effectively outed (Graham 180).

An illustrative case in point can be found in the *Masquerade Project*, an endeavor undertaken by a New York-based artistic collective during the summer of 2001. Anticipating that the conventional methods of protest, characterized by individuals brandishing banners and directly confronting the authorities, would merely be subsumed within the corporate mainstream media, the project's participants astutely recognized the need to adopt a more elusive and enigmatic approach. Specifically, they envisioned the necessity of showcasing a disparate spectacle—one wherein queer bodies would congregate in a carnivalesque assembly, deliberately juxtaposed and in diametrical contradiction to the uniformed representatives of authority.

In a deliberate nod to the theatrical provocations of the 1960s, wherein the avant-garde of political performance endeavored to amalgamate the realms of art and existence, the visionaries behind the *Masquerade Project* orchestrated a street-based cabaret performance. This meticulously devised spectacle aimed to underscore the stark disparity between the vibrancy of life's exuberance and the oppressive uniformity emblematic of the enforcers of the status quo. The activists wrote on the practical use of the extravagantly decorated masks: "We believe our movement should reflect the world we want to create. And for us, that is the world with loads of color, sparkle, variety, and individual creativity…We are using bright paints, rhinestones, sequins, glitter, and trim to transform the masks we will be giving away into splendid and sassy creations "(The Masquerade Project Manifesto 2001).

Similar to the theatrical attacks of the 1960s, where political performance avant-guards aimed to fuse art and life, the creators of *Masquerade Project* produced a street cabaret for hundreds in order to reveal a contrast between

life and the forces of oppression. While the queer activists masked themselves with the symbolism of carnival, with extravagantly decorated masks, those masks also served the practical purpose of protecting them from chemical gasses. By giving away the masks for free, the participants of this project denied the exchange value of the objects that they labored to produce, all the while showing the world that, on the streets against oppressive forces of the state, they cared for each other. In other words, they gave the world a glimpse of the kind of new world they wanted to build.

Figure 3. Photograph of the *Masquerade Project* used during the 2001 IMF and World Bank protests in Washington D.C. Open source: http://realchangenews.org/art-and-activism

1.4. **Tactical Frivolity**

Spanish artist Marcel Expósito in two sequential video works, highlights the free and joyous contact among the people who intended to break the usual hierarchical relationships in the society. His first video, *Radical Imagination* (*Carnivals of Resistance)* (61 min., 2004), traces the origins of the anti-globalization movement by documenting the occupation of the financial center in London, one of the main protests which came to be known as 'J-18.' The video opens with a series of images from historical paintings and scenes from black and white movies that tie together a ritual, carnival art, and performance, then continues with the interviews of the activists and scenes from the carnivalesque street protests. It shows intricate and seminal facets of emergent activism, a phenomenon that blossomed amidst the anti-globalization demonstrations unfurled in Prague during the global day of action in September 2000. In this widely circulated video, this carnivalesque sojourn is anchored upon the conceptual framework of 'tactical frivolity,' an astute coinage that elucidates the burgeoning multiplicity of protest frontiers. One of the interviewees in the video asserts: "…Unless you create a space where people enjoy changing the world, a space of joy and conviviality, you are not going to change anything … We wanted to get away from a traditional confrontational protest situation and prefigure our imagined world in the moment of the joy of the protest itself" (Expósito 2004). It is within this framework that ostentatious representations of corporeal aesthetics emerge as formidable weapons for a shared act of imagination and action boldly wielded in direct confrontation with the police.

Figure 4. Video still from Marcelo Expósito, *Tactical Frivolity: Rhymes of Resistance*, 2007. Open source:www.apexart.org/radicalimagination/php.

'Tactical frivolity', as ingeniously posited by Expósito, is unveiled as a creative, ebullient, multifarious, and pliant manifestation of direct action and civil disobedience. In this visual narrative, Expósito masterfully unveils the Pink and Silver Bloc, resplendent in their audacious pink regalia, bedecked with nine-foot-high fantails. Towering bouffant wings grace their heads, and in their hands, magic wands shimmer with latent enchantment. These resolute women, in an act of choreographed defiance, serenade the befuddled Czech police with their vivacious dance. The cinematic canvas thus reveals that music and dance transmogrify into potent instruments, not only for the pragmatic dissolution or circumvention of police brutality, but also as a vivid portrayal, both visual and auditory, of the release of suppressed desires and pent-up fury during the vehemence of protests. through the lens of Expósito's cinematic oeuvre, we are beckoned to traverse a multifaceted realm where the resonance of 'tactical frivolity' orchestrates a symphony of resistance, transcending the corporeal constraints of identity and passing into the liminal space of societal transformation, reminiscent of Bakhtin's conceptualization of the mask as an emblematic embodiment of carnival revelry:

> The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles Bakhtin, 40).

The film serves as an invaluable treatise on the role, symbolism, and profundity embedded in the masquerade and the habiliments that adorn the participants in this activist praxis. Expósito's video emphasized the role and symbolism of the mask and the significance of the carnivalesque in activist praxis and, as he says: "the mask expresses the joy of sequence of reincarnation, of light-hearted relativity and the negation of identity and the single meaning, it is an expression of a transferal, metamorphosis, breaking down frontiers, ridiculing, of new name…" (Expósito 2004). Expósito, as an artist and activist, in those two-video works highlights the free and joyous contact among the people who intend to break the usual hierarchical relationships in the society. Expósito's articulation harmoniously resonates with the notions expounded by Bakhtin, who discerned profound symbolic significance in the carnival masks of the Mediaeval era.

1.5 **Horizontal Activism and the Politics of Visibility**

Carnival, in essence, serves to enhance the allure and enduring quality of rebellion, rendering it a more engaging, all-encompassing, jubilant, and inexorable phenomenon. The contemporary milieu of protest culture is marked by the espousal of fundamental tenets, including diversity, ingenuity, dispersion of authority, horizontal structuring, egalitarianism, and immediate involvement—principles fundamentally congruous with the very essence of carnival. With regard to the shared attributes between the carnival and contemporary political activism, activists expound as follows:

> It [carnival] demands interaction and flexibility, face-to-face contact and collective decision-making so that a dynamic and direct democracy develops–a democracy which takes place on the stage of spontaneously unfolding life, not raised above the audience but at ground level, where everyone can be involved. There are no leaders, no spectators, no sidelines, only an entanglement of many players who do their own thing while feeling part of a greater whole (Ainger 2003, 178).

According to sociologist Geoffrey Pleyers, contemporary activists construct democratic relations in daily life during the uprisings and protests by creating the so-called spaces of experience that are "…sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society [to] permit actors to live according to their own principles, to knit different social relations and to express their subjectivity" (Pleyers 2010, 39). Pleyers elucidates the concept of spaces wherein the facets of imagination and pleasure are not only

accommodated but also exalted as intrinsic components of political involvement. Remarkably, this celebration of the pleasure principle is concomitantly intertwined with the ethos of horizontality and active participation. In lieu of adhering to conventional hierarchical structures, these spaces adopt a horizontal approach to mobilization. Instead of endorsing delegation and representation, they fervently advocate for widespread participation. Moreover, they eschew specialization in favor of instituting a systematic rotation of responsibilities. This transformative restructuring of activist spheres, their temporal dynamics, and the nature of activities therein constitutes a deliberate endeavor to disrupt the established societal paradigms within the dominant socio-political framework. These paradigms, hitherto ingrained in traditional modes of activism, are challenged through the deliberate cultivation of alternative principles. David Graeber duly acknowledges the emergence of such distinctive aesthetics within activist organizations, as he keenly observed during anti-globalization protests:

> In fact, from the perspective of the activists, it is again processed—in this case, the process of production—that is really the point. There are brainstorming sessions to come up with themes and visions, organizing meetings, but above all, the wires and frames lie on the floors of garages or yards or warehouses or similar quasi-industrial spaces for days, surrounded by buckets of paint and construction materials, almost never alone, with small teams in attendance, molding, painting, smoking, eating, playing music, arguing, wandering in and out. Everything is designed to be communal, egalitarian, and expressive (Graeber 2007, 382).

In concurrence with the *Carnival Against Capital* protests of the same year, Ken Hirshkop made a notable contribution to the academic discourse with the publication of his book entitled *Michael Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy.* Within this work, Hirshkop delved into Michael Bakhtin's conceptual framework, particularly his notion of dialogism. In his exposition, Hirshkop contended that dialogism transcends the mere occurrence of spoken or written dialogue; instead, it pertains to the intricate landscape of our experiences concerning meaning. He posited that the essence of dialogism lies in the "experience of our experiences of meaning," whereby what we perceive as meaningful is inherently imbued with a dialogic quality, representing an event of communication. Hirshkop's perspective posits dialogical communication as a collective social act, eclipsing the conventional understanding of dialogue as a verbal exchange solely between two individuals. Bakhtin, in his seminal work "Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics," expounded upon his theory of dialogism, shedding light on the profound implications of speech interactions. Bakhtin elucidated that these interactions constitute an intimate yet fundamentally ordinary exchange characterized by the dissemination of incongruous and irreducible elements, defying attempts at forging a cohesive unity. Bakhtin's theory fundamentally underscores the transformative potential inherent in dialogue, emphasizing the possibility of individuals and society undergoing profound metamorphoses through the process of engaging with and assimilating fragments of each other's discourses. This conceptualization thus underscores the pivotal role of dialogism in catalyzing meaningful social and intellectual evolution.

The Gezi Park protests in Turkey in 2013 were initiated by a novel and visually arresting manifestation: individuals adorned in clown attire parading through the park, accompanied by an assortment of percussionists producing rhythmic cadences, and a multitude of participants engaged in spirited chants and exuberant dances (Figure 5). This emblematic strategy served as a powerful metaphor, emblematic of the recognition that when met with humor and nonviolent expression, the repressive capacities of the establishment become constrained. The juxtaposition of law enforcement officers quelling a group of jesters or dispersing individuals adorned in fantastical regalia with tear gas significantly eroded the government's carefully cultivated image.

In accordance with Bakhtin's theoretical framework, it can be argued that individuals, and by extension society as a whole, possess the capacity for transformation through the medium of dialogue, wherein disparate elements merge with segments of one another's discursive constructs.

Figure 5 Video still from Claudia Carloyn,Tanzende Revolte am Bosporus, 2015 (about Gezi Protests in Istanbul) Dervish dancer: Ziya Azazi. Open source: https://filmfreeway.com/818680

Amidst the monumental upheaval of the Gezi uprising, an unprecedented convergence of dialogical and discursive interactions manifested among conflicting factions within Turkish society. Notably, anarchists assembled a human barrier to safeguard the security of Muslim worshippers engaged in prayer. Concurrently, members of the LGBTQ+ community joined forces with football hooligans of a chauvinistic disposition to jointly resist the onslaught of law enforcement. Even more remarkable was the sight of adherents from the nation's four major football clubs, historically disinclined to assemble for a collective photograph, embracing one another in their respective team regalia for the lenses of cameras. This phenomenon bears profound social and political import, given its entwinement with the president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, (then prime minister), fostered a socio-political milieu steeped in discrimination. Erdoğan, along with his predominantly male cabinet, has been notable for the dissemination of discriminatory rhetoric, replete with homophobic, xenophobic, and misogynistic tenets. The juxtaposition of seemingly antithetical factions, including but not limited to football hooligans and LGBT advocates, nationalists and Kurds, Sunnis and Alevites, assumes an unprecedented significance. Within this crucible, antagonists, who hitherto shunned one another's very presence in the public domain, not only listen to each other but also extend recognition to divergent perspectives, fostering an environment conducive to democratic discourse.

The street protests all round Turkey and the occupation of Gezi Park in Istanbul from May 28 to 15 June 2013, witnessed an amalgamation of carnivalesque aesthetics including music concerts, recitations of poetry, traditional halay dances, mesmerizing whirling dervishes, theatrical

performances, and invigorating yoga sessions, all of which afforded these disparate groups opportunities for corporeal and dialogic engagement. To ensure the preservation of this idyllic paradigm, characterized by the harmonious confluence of liberty and solidarity, dedicated committees took form, diligently safeguarding against any perturbations to this tranquil and joyful union. The egalitarian and democratic ethos manifest within the Gezi commune, the conviviality emblematic of the carnival, and the dynamism evinced by collective laughter coalesced into what has since been dubbed as the 'Gezi Spirit' by sociologist Meyda Yeğenoğlu. She comments: "By remaining indifferent to democracy as a political system that is instituted in a top-down fashion, they are now accomplishing a carnivalesque displacement of existing enmities (Yeğenoğlu 2013, 3). In Turkey, 'Gezi spirit' is still being used to refer to the transformative experience people had during the Gezi Uprising that had manifested itself in collectivity and solidarity of the people of all ethnicities and identities as well as its political effects in a recreation of new bonds, new values, and new subjectivities. This spirit finds resonance in Bakhtin's elucidation of a comparable phenomenon within the medieval carnival context:

> The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore, such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind (Bakhtin, 10).

5. Conclusions

As we have observed in the recent Occupy protests, the Arab Spring, the anti-austerity movements in Spain and Greece, the Gezi Uprising, and recently the Extinction Rebellion protests for climate change, the aesthetic experimentation, tactics, relations and experiences do more than giving visibility to the movement and the protestors (Figure 6). Those uprisings have challenged the notion that aesthetics and political involvement are the domain of a select few, marking a profound departure from the conventional understanding of who can be considered a political participant.

In light of Bakhtin, the paper argued that carnival could be thought of as the festive organization of a crowd–sensual and subversive–that is charged with political as well as aesthetic experience. It also could be thought of as a multitude of shattered unities, a displaced spectacle within life, where the new utopian order replaces its sovereign. This kind of union celebrates people's freedom, equality, and brotherhood in an exultation of sensory experience. At this in-between stage of existence, one is transferred to the other, with the euphoria of change and renewal. The paper asserted that the carnivalesque aesthetic functions as a catalyst, actively engaging cognitive, sensory, and intellectual faculties, fostering the emergence of novel subjectivities. This, in turn, permits the creation of political arenas wherein individuals share equitable capacities for observation, action, and discourse. In our contemporary milieu, where an authoritative narrative imposes a singular interpretation of facts, suppressing the possibility of alternative viewpoints and instigating apathy towards the most pressing of crises, such as climate change, civil rights, and human rights, any endeavor to disrupt the encroaching fascism within our modes of perception and interpretation represents a radical and imperative political undertaking.

It is evident that within these movements, there exists a profound synergy between aesthetic experimentation, strategic tactics, interpersonal relations, and individual experiences, extending far beyond merely amplifying the visibility of the movement and its adherents. These mobilizations manifest as self-organized spaces deliberately cultivated to serve as experimental grounds for an oppositional cultural milieu, deeply influenced by the global undercurrent of this cultural ethos. These spaces effectively intertwine participatory models of democracy with a commitment to fostering dialogism and engagement,

Figure 6. Rebel Clowns at the Extinction Rebellion Summer Uprising 2019. Photograph Robyn Hambrook.`

thereby nurturing the production of radical subjectivity. The distinctive character of this form of mobilization lies in its multifaceted definition of crisis, encompassing not only economic, social, and political dimensions but also representational and aesthetic facets.

The ubiquity of carnivalesque elements, including laughter, satire, dance, masks, and costumes, within the context of urban street protests, serves a dual purpose of shielding demonstrators from potential police violence and affording them a platform for visibility and audibility among their peers and within the broader societal framework. Beginning with the notable events that unfolded in Seattle in 1999, the landscape of mass street protests has evolved into a collective endeavor driven not by political parties, groups, or ideological affiliations, but rather by a diverse assembly of individuals who recognized that political representation is closely related to aesthetic representation (Tunali 2018).

At their core, urban social movements represent a quest for the fundamental right to be seen and heard—a democratic struggle aimed at establishing equitable representation, both in the realms of politics and aesthetics. This pursuit of equal existence becomes intimately intertwined with the democratic utilization of public spaces, effectively transforming these urban arenas into battlegrounds where the competing interests of dominant and marginalized factions clash. In light of these dynamics, it has become

evident why the protestors of urban social movements gravitate towards the concept of carnival as a means of aesthetic transgression. Carnival, in its disruptive and subversive spirit, encapsulates the essence of their struggle—unveiling the inherent tensions and contradictions within the democratic fabric, all while fostering a sense of unity and collective agency among those who have historically been relegated to the periphery of societal discourse.

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