



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Notting Hill Carnival: history

The Notting Hill Carnival is an annual street event named after the area of West London where it takes place. This first film looks at the origins and history of this carnival where members of post-colonial societies in the former British Caribbean, descended from African heritage, moved again, this time to the metropolitan centre of the former empire, London of the 1950s. The histories of carnival are complex, divergent, and largely held in oral tradition, but the film attempts to chart a narrative of carnival's origins and the stories which are now told about it.

The film and the two audio perspectives provide ideas and information relating to how

- Notting Hill Carnival may be an invention of post-colonialism
- the carnival relates to the expression of cultural identity of British African Caribbean people.

If you haven't already done so, watch the film 'Notting Hill Carnival: history' and listen to the two academic perspectives now.

You might also find it useful to read this short extract from Chapter 5 of *Understanding Heritage and Memory* (Tim Benton (ed.), Manchester University Press, 2010)

Multiculturalism and globalisation

Multiculturalism is integrally linked with globalisation. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai suggests we might think of the term 'culturalism' as an active term denoting 'identities consciously in the making' (1996: 15). He discusses the phenomena of culturalism in the light of the widespread emergence of ethnic nationalism and separatism which characterised the last decade of the twentieth century (e.g. in the Balkan States and post-Soviet nations) which was coupled with the phenomenon of globalisation. He suggested that the ethnic violence which accompanied this ethnic nationalism was not a rebirth of 'tribalisms' or old histories, but a new phenomenon relating to the employment of cultural differences to serve national or transnational political interests. Appadurai sees culturalism as linked closely to the idea of migration or succession of groups of people. These movements deliberately evoke aspects of history and heritage in the struggle between particular groups and the state.

One of the reasons why groups of people might feel the need to more consciously employ heritage to reproduce their identities in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first relates to the rapid acceleration of change and the state of mass migration and continual electronic mediation which is a part of globalisation.

What is new is that this is a world in which both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference, as critical life choices are made, can be very difficult...as the search for certainties is regularly frustrated by the fluidities of transnational communication. As group pasts become increasingly parts of museums, exhibits and collections, both in national and transnational spectacles, culture becomes less what Pierre Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation, the later often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences (1996: 44).

References

Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large*, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis and New York.

So when we think about multiculturalism, it is perhaps better to think of multi-‘culturalism’, in the sense in which multicultural societies are composed of one or more groups actively using various forms of representation to imagine themselves and their relationships not only with other groups of people, but also with the nation state. Similarly, it involves the work of the nation state in imagining itself and its relationship with its citizens in particular ways, and the various economic and political implications of that work of imagination.

So what do you think about the following questions:

- **In what ways do you think the Notting Hill Carnival is an invention of post-colonialism?**
- **How do you think the carnival relates to the expression of cultural identity of British African Caribbean people?**

Feedback

The Notting Hill Carnival was developed to deal with the specific problem of rioting and racial integration in London in the 1950s and 1960s. As a response to colonialism it uses the power of the history of African slavery and emancipation to comment on the conditions of life within a new country. Although it draws on various cultural connections with the history of slavery, it is a specific response to racism in England, and, as expressed so elegantly by Claire Holder, is about 'Black people claiming the right and the freedom to live freely'. Chris Mullard commented that Notting Hill Carnival came out of a 'cauldron of hate'. It was developed as a reaction to racism, but is also about evoking tradition and is thus connected with the past and with a sense of cultural identity. Many of the speakers articulated their pride in considering themselves as both British and from Trinidad or Tobago when they participate in the carnival. Although it has its roots in Trinidad and Tobago, Notting Hill Carnival developed within a unique post-colonial context, a unique mixture of traditions and cultures, and in this sense it can be understood to be simultaneously British, African and Caribbean.