The Victorian Criminal Underworld and the Musical Carnivalesque

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Abstract:
This article sets out to explore how a neo-Victorian fascination for re-imagining the grotesque 'Other' of a Victorian criminal underworld is framed by the dual nature of the carnivalesque. I argue that, as utopian and dystopian musical screen adaptations of Victorian urban gothic realism, Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* and Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd* demonstrate a shift in the cultural evaluation of a carnival aesthetic that is inter-dependent on conflicting ideas of communal integration and social inequality. I explore why post-war celebrations of Dickensian carnival joy and communal harmony are challenged by dark parodies that amplify a horrific excess symbolising the return of the repressed, as well as a hybrid excess, signalling the gluttony of neo-Victorian indulgence.

Keywords: adaptation, carnivalesque, Charles Dickens, 'gothical', hyper-realism, musical, *Oliver Twist*, postmodern, Sweeney Todd, urban gothic.

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As a literary mode, the carnivalesque is invariably integral to a Victorian perspective of the criminal underworld conveyed in nineteenth-century urban realism and its latter-day revisions in neo-Victorian artistic mediums. Because screen musicals naturally lend themselves to the textual and generic richness of the Rabelaisian carnivalesque, they rekindle or foreground its multivalent principles. As John Galvin points out, conventional adaptations frequently fetishise only mimesis, imitating the original text's imitation of life (Galvin 1999: 28). This article will examine how the musical as a screen genre is particularly apposite for amplifying a 'performative' rather than mimetic quality that resides within the grotesque realism/carnivalesque of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837-8) and the penny dreadful serial, *The String of Pearls: A Romance* (1846-7), which became the enduring narrative of Sweeney Todd. By focussing on Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* (1968) and Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007), I will examine how the ambivalent aesthetic nature of the carnivalesque resulted in two contrasting musical screen adaptations.

1. The Carnival Myth and Parodies of Carnival Excess

As Peter Womack states: "Carnival discourse is violent and hospitable, dismembering and vivifying, abusive and affirmatory" (Womack 1999: 132). In *Oliver!*, the carnivalesque is visualised as colourful, vibrant, and almost picturesque, projecting a sense of spontaneous warmth and hospitality expressed through communal displays of physical and visual excess that involve eating, dancing, and singing. Lionel Bart's musical spectacle belongs to a cinematic tradition that expresses the celebratory mood of the carnival. Whilst Bart exploits the gay performance space of carnivalesque utopia, Tim Burton, on the other hand, exploits the wild violations of anarchic degeneration to invert the symbolic regeneration of communal integration and rebirth. He invests the violence and extravagance of a carnival 'theatre of cruelty' into a subgenre of the musical, one which I term 'the gothical', by mixing the sensory exuberance of a musical carnivalesque with the physical horrors of an urban gothic tradition. The surreal and nauseating juxtaposition of a bloody orgy with counterpointing music further extends the hybridic generic nature of a gothical tradition, previously seen in Ken Hill's 1976 musical adaptation of Gaston Leroux's 1909-10 gothic novel *The Phantom of the Opera*, and the 1973 British stage musical *The Rocky Horror Show*, which was first transposed for the cinema screen in 1975 as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Tim Burton's gothical re-imagining also belongs to an anti-masque tradition best exemplified in the satirical ballad opera of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), which, combining popular broadsheet ballads, opera arias, church hymns and folk tunes of the time, mocks the inequities of high society. Tim Burton amplifies the implied grotesque excesses of a literary/cinematic gothic tradition to realise the 'dark parody of the carnival', in which food instead becomes a symbol of cannibalistic excess, signalling the return of the repressed. I will demonstrate how *Oliver!*, through physical and social exchange, presents a carnivalesque utopia of the criminal underworld as opposed to the gothical dystopia of *Sweeney Todd*, which visualises dismemberment to stress the tragic disparity between the criminalised outsider and the law-abiding upper-world of society.

In *Victorian Afterlife*, Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich argue that postmodern political narratives "have identified the nineteenth century as a site of origin and rupture, a moment of emergence" (Kucich & Sadoff 2000: xx). For example, the Victorian industrial era both marks the origin of an

exploitative capitalist system that dehumanised a labour force as an objectified attendant of the machine, and the emergence of a class consciousness aligned with Marxist notions of commodification, fetishisation and consumption. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) also serves as a site of origin and rupture in re-inventing a seasonal carnival event and marking the emergence of a particular Dickensian Christmas experience, which has been transformed into a sacred element of popular folklore aligned with the commercial spectacle of excessive consumption. Seasonal screen adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* are familiar to us as X-mas pudding and lame cracker jokes, and further entrench into popular culture constructions of a Dickensian 'Quality Street' world in which viewers participate as celebrants in an imaginary carnival community.

Dependent upon a schematised structuralist reading of amplifying the privileged values of carnival joy, the musical film of *Oliver!* (1968) set a precedent for a conventional form of neo-Victorian nostalgia. *Scrooge* (1970), inspired by *Oliver!*, further exemplifies the commercial endorsement of carnival joy by visualising a didactic dialectic: a repressed, anti-social, mercenary employer who does not submit to the redemptive values of the carnivalesque. Originally, Scrooge's conversion to the transfiguring values of a Dickensian Christmas carnival world signalled the overthrow of an ethos of carnival-denial founded in the utilitarian values of an industrial Victorian culture. On the other hand, Blackadder's *Christmas Carol* (1988) typifies a postmodern deconstructive reading, exposing the internal contradiction of a Dickensian Christmas that has become ideologically familiar as a festive experience that no longer symbolically inverts a norm as ideological upheaval, but instead indicates a post-industrial capitalist culture that commodifies Christmas, encouraging further indulgence in the pleasures of material and individualistic excess. Echoing Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, first produced in 1943, Blackadder's carnival parody offsets the idealism of self-sacrificing altruism with the demands of a contemporary individual materialism, which takes advantage of the Christmas spirit. Whilst conventional screen adaptations highlight the opposition between the carnival community and the denying individual, postmodern parodies privilege instead the critical voice of the outsider who subverts the either/or polemic. Ebenezer Blackadder is accused of being a "gullible prat" for buying unthinkingly into the ethos of a Dickensian carnival Christmas (Boden 1988). Enlightened by an approving

Christmas Present ghost who shows him a future of humiliating servitude, the parody inverts the process of carnival conversion by re-appropriating the cynical wit of Scrooge: "Every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas', on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake through his heart" (Dickens 1984: 14). Scrooge's oppositional attitude uncannily mirrors Blackadder's denuding of a sentimental bonhomie that exists in a mock-Victorian culture: "Tiny Tom is fifteen stones, built like a brick-house privy and will turn into a pie factory if he eats more heartily" (Boden 1988). Blackadder regresses to the pre-converted Scrooge and so the mock-adaptation reverts to an anti-masque tradition, betraying the excess of a mono-cultural Christmas that churns out Dickensian repeats. Blackadder's reconversion to a Scrooge-like cynic is not only an ideological critique of the decadence of a Thatcherite culture based on a return to 'Victorian values', but also a denuding of a TV culture over-weaned on post-war apolitical Dickensian screen adaptations, which initiate Scrooge into the capitalist jollity of infantilised consumerism.

As an 'oppositional' reading to a neo-Victorian world, *Blackadder's Christmas Carol* is part of a multiple commentary upon the source text, offering conflicting productions of meaning. The dialogue between narratives of the present day and the nineteenth century is "strongly based on the concept of intertextuality" (Kirchknopf 2008: 54). A postmodern discourse of subversive re-readings of canonical Victorian texts foregrounds the "still unresolved exploitative context" that continues to affect our contemporary identity (Kirchknopf 2008: 69). Like other hybrid parodies, such as *Scrooged* (1988), starring Bill Murray, that are part of a complex network of 'inter-mediality', deconstructive re-writings raise problems with a set of inherited Victorian values and reiterate the paradoxes of historical continuity and disruption (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xiii). In reacting to a culture of TV communal evangelism mimicking Dickens' carnival didacticism, Blackadder conscripts us into an alternative message shared by a pre-converted Scrooge: "Let me leave it [Christmas] alone, then" (Dickens 1984: 14). Therefore, I also argue that screen musicals react to a traditional neo-Victorian nostalgia for Dickensian carnival joy by imaginatively embracing the more cynical aspects of the grotesque other, and so exploit the sinister other-side of the carnivalesque. Following a post-war decade of state-imposed rationing and austere self-sacrifice and self-discipline, Bart's production of *Oliver!* signals a significant shift is using Dickens' novels as a

source for aestheticising a nostalgic recycling of Victorian urban realism in rejuvenating carnivalesque terms. This is equivalent to representing "the Victorian social system monolithically", subsuming social conflict under a common ethos (Kucich & Sadoff 2000: xii). In other words, the 'reality principle' of a capitalist logic is conveniently ignored for the sake of domestic family viewing. On the other hand, Burton's *Sweeney Todd*, as a continuation of postmodern pastiche, extends the licensed carnival excess into a nihilistic view of an unceasing class struggle that denies jubilant closure. In re-imagining the cinematic traditions of gothic noir and nineteenth-century gothic horror, Tim Burton exults in the 'death drive' of cannibalistic horror, à la zombie films, to subvert a homogenised carnival view of society so as to articulate notions of social degeneration instead. In echoing George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which the undead in Monoroeville Mall mimic a mass hysteria fuelled by large corporations of American consumerism and suburban social decadence, the destructive nihilism of Burton's Sweeney Todd also reflects the commodity cannibalism of post-industrial capitalism.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin and the Carnivalesque

In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Mikhail Bakhtin observes that the carnivalesque spirit is associated with a collectivity in which all are considered equal, and the lower stratum of life is held most important, as opposed to higher functions that are held dear in the signifying order: speech, thought, and the soul. Within the carnival there exists a heightened sense of the sensual, bodily unity and community. In other words, there is an unruly biological and social exchange that drives its expressive qualities. For Bakhtin, in Rabelais' world the grotesque is not "far removed from the primitive community's ritual laughter", which creates a "suspension of all hierarchical precedence" (Bakhtin 1965: 7-10). The riotous laughter of the carnival is not a merely a negative satire, as it asserts alien values to revive the old world. The carnivalesque spirit is expressed through a type of grotesque imagery, which focuses on bodily functions such as eating, drinking, and defecation. As in the carnival where the unacknowledged world of popular culture is freely expressed, the carnivalesque is a means of expressing otherness, making familiar relations strange with an emphasis on interconnectedness. As Michael Holquist puts it: "The novel is the great book of life because it celebrates the grotesque body of the world" (Holquist

1990: 89). Focusing on the exchange of bodily images, the novel conveys the idea of life as a continual process of birth, growth, death and renewal, and this is supported by other attributes of the grotesque: hyperbolism, excessiveness, and a form of caricature, to highlight the spontaneous and contradictory nature of an intoxicating and excessive folk celebration that offers both dismemberment and liberation. This physical revelry is aligned with a spatial journey of descent into the lower stratum of society:

> The mighty thrust downward into the bowels of the earth, into the depths of the human body [...] the downward movement animates all [Rabelais'] images [...] directed toward the underworld, both earthly and bodily. (Bakhtin 1965: 370)

For Bakhtin, the upward and downward spheres in Renaissance cosmology had a strict topographical meaning: degradation and debasement is associated with the lower body of "genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks" (Bakhtin 1965: 21). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson refer to this as "spatial orientation" in which we find the following equivalent aspects: sickness, death, a lower spirit, the unconscious, emotions, depravity, and low status (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 14-19). In the grotesque realism of Victorian literature, the criminal underworld is aligned to a lower spatial environ and certain biological/material elements, with the habits and habitation of criminality expressed through an associated system of grotesque images.

3. Food Glorious Food

As Rick Altman's *Genre: The Musical* argues, screen musicals that follow the laws of classical Hollywood narrative reaffirm the values of entertainment by visually celebrating the ethos of spontaneous joy, social integration, and audience participation (Altman 1981: 159-169). For Richard Dyer, such joyous investment amounts to utopian optimism and conservative escapism. The fantasy allows for the intensification of emotion and self-expression, and displays of abundance, freedom and community. The relationship between the musical and social space and time conventionally expresses a liminal or utopian liberated place that eschews the socio-political dimensions of realism (Marshall 2000: 2-3). The bodily

activities of human consumption – food, drink and dance – are central to this carnivalesque celebration. This imaginary space appeals to mass culture because it gives the momentary impression of social unity and physical and sensory excess. For example, in *Gold Diggers of 1933* (directed by Mervyn KeRoy), the opening song, 'We're in the Money', sung by a choral parade of dancing girls semi-clad in over-sized American dollar coins, instantly strikes the upbeat tempo/mood and fantasy of sexual and monetary abundance. Loss and want are symbolically displaced as rich pickings for all, including the poor, dispossessed and marginalised. Dyer's argument is that the basic contradictions generated by the gaps and inadequacies of capitalism are glossed over, and the alienated individual becomes a part of "a community of carnival celebrants" (Belton 2005: 166). Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* too expresses the utopian joy of carnival excess within a neo-Victorian urban space in which the criminal underworld mixes with material abundance of the upper-world. In a post-war Britain, in which a pre-war political and social consensus had disintegrated, *Oliver!* perhaps expresses the wish-fulfilment of a new generation and Clement Atlee's and The Labour Party's desired social utopia. In this imaginary space, the marginalised other-world of working-class communities unites with the rest of the nation to evoke generational renewal.

As Vincent Newey points out, "the political imperative to reject and the imaginative urge to embrace [the grotesque other] permeates the representation of the underworld in *Oliver Twist*" (Newey 2004: 90). This ambivalence inflects fear and wonder into the narrator's voice when visualising the criminal underworld in The Three Cripples Inn. Nevertheless, despite the moral anxieties of an emblematic outside observer, this is not a place of repressive uniformity, but one in which the "dense tobacco smell", the confused "noises", "the jingling piano", the "rough [...] boisterous [...] company", and "drunk-eness in all its stages", evinces the crowded and sensory variety of anarchic disorder (Dickens 1999: 198-199). Despite the narrator's attempt to grade criminals according to type of vice or criminality, this miscellaneous underworld defies discursive classification. As Franco Moretti states, Dickens makes London a larger and more complex city by joining up the two halves of London, allowing for "richer, more unpredictable interactions" (Moretti 1998: 86). From the perspective of Jonathan Raban, The Three Cripples Inn conveys the "soft city of illusion", where the lines between the two worlds momentarily collapse, and

where the outside observer viscerally experiences a community of strangers, as opposed to the 'hard' city one can locate "in monographs on urban sociology" (Raban 1998: 10). For not only is *Oliver Twist* a satire on the New Poor Law of 1834 but also on the limits of rationality as embodied in the utilitarian social vision of Benthamism and other social thinkers, who tried to map and contain the criminals as well as the poor in discursive constructs. For example, Henry Mayhew's *London and the London Poor* (1849-50) aims to study the London poor, occupation by occupation, trade by trade, and gives the impression of empirical realism by using a quasi-scientific model of taxonomy to classify people according to type: "The members of every community may be divided into the *energetic* and the *an-energetic*; that is to say, into the hardworking and the non-working, the industrious and the indolent classes [...]." (Mayhew 1985: 451)

Mayhew then proceeds to sub-divide further according to groups' "moral defect[iveness]", as apparent in Fagin or Sikes, and sees these types as "human parasites living on the sustenance of their fellows" (Mayhew 1985: 451). Such discursive and moral classification of criminal types is a way of reducing the criminal multitude to a quantifiable schema. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault argues that Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon represented a new instrument of power to make the invisible criminal visible. Through visibility society exercises systems of power; hence, "the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies" (Foucault 1979: 217). For Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon was a new mode of obtaining power of mind over body; accordingly Oliver's escape from a Benthamite institution of discipline, where he is kept separate from the outside world, can be read as a rejection of the hard metaphors of the city and the human subject and an embracing of the invisible, criminal, carnival body.

Therefore the mode of representation in *Oliver Twist* significantly alters to carnival wonder as Oliver makes for London. As Stephen Gill points out, low characters, untrammelled by genteel properties, manners and language, are initially associated with visual and linguistic excess and later with extreme violence (Dickens 1999: xii-xxiv). The vigorous comic life of the underworld is shown in the environment and intensity and passion of the characters, such as Jack Dawkins. Short for his age, wearing a hat that threatens to fall off every moment and an oversized man's coat and shirt and corduroy trousers, the Artful Dodger is a hybridic embodiment of the

shabby-genteel tramp, a heterogeneous mix of mock-refinement and the romantic lawless outcast:

> [He was] one of the queerest-looking boys that Oliver had ever seen. He was snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had the airs and manners of a man [….] His hat stuck on the top of his head so lightly, that it threatened to fall off every moment […] He wore a man's coat, which nearly reached to his heels [….] He was, altogether, as roystering and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or sometimes less, in his bulchers (Dickens 1999: 3).

Dodger's contrived middle-class coded manners and speech lay claim to a dignity above his station, thus giving him a pseudo-adult appearance; thus Dickens subverts the perceived social importance of visual signifiers just before Oliver spatially, within the urban topography, descends into the lower stratum/bowels of society:

> A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy; and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops, but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children, who, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside (Dickens 1999: 59-60).

The Artful Dodger is the guardian to an underworld taking Oliver to Fagin's enclosed den within the labyrinthine depths of London which represents a makeshift substitute for the lost biological home. The porous public spaces within the dirty filth of a slum district frame Oliver's entry into the fraternity of Fagin's criminal underworld. The connection between homelessness and crime is enforced throughout *Oliver Twist*, and with Fagin he finds a pseudo-father, and a kind of community that evokes anarchic warmth. Dickens captures the quotidian and carnivalesque details of a lowly London world that visually defies a social sense of order and law-abiding regulation. Emboldened by youthful wonder rather than adult middle-class

fear, Oliver is initially entranced by the carnival unity and spirit of Fagin's urban sub-system, before being initiated into the benevolent ways of middle-class society. The carnivalesque frames Oliver's socialisation, with the criminal underworld appearing as a utopian liberating space, symbolically inverting socially perceived norms. Jack Dawkins' heterogeneous, and visually grotesque, attire subverts socio-visual signifiers and is a symbolic precursor to the descent into the urban grotesque where, as Hollington argues, discontinuities and incongruous juxtapositions emphasise further social ironies (Hollington 1984: 56-61). In Fagin's subterranean criminal network, the illusions of home and work are at least voiced. The carnivalesque temporarily disrupts the spatio-temporal boundaries that mark the upper from the lower world. Here the carnivalesque space symbolically threatens the logo-centrism of the established status quo.

As a realisation of the celebratory elements of the carnivalesque, Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* immediately expresses Dickens' imaginative urge to embrace the grotesque other. *Oliver!* energises the cohesive force of the carnivalesque via the exuberance of choreographed dance routines, widescreen cinematography, energetic ensemble songs, and singing cockney children and comic street-wise criminals. Here the violent energies or demonic exuberance of criminal figures of vice are transformed into a transcendent social drive. All affirm Dickens' concept of 'fancy' which is aligned to ideas of escapist imagination as well as humanist benevolence in defiance of the mechanistic thought of industrialised Britain. The first song we hear in Act I of *Oliver!*, following the opening overture, is when all the boys, as a chorus in the workhouse, sing 'Food, Glorious Food': "Food, glorious food! Hot sausage and mustard! While we're in the mood – /Cold jelly and custard! Pease pudding and saveloys 'What next?' is the question. /Rich gentlemen have it boys In-dye-gestion!" (Bart 1960: 2-7)

The focus is on the magical reviving qualities of food to underscore the notion of interconnectedness through physical and social exchange. The bodily function of eating is spatially aligned to a lower order and is transfigured into a form of carnivalesque feasting to satirically counterpoint instruments of regulation. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens associates the lack of food with the denial of humane treatment towards children. The refusal to give more gruel to Oliver is a denial to give affection and acceptance to the vulnerable – the children, who symbolise exclusion from the family unit.

Joseph Gold relates Oliver's cravings for food and love to a fundamental need for a mother, the primal human community (Gold 1972: 37). The early chapters, when Oliver experiences the provisions of the state, Dickens derides the state's performance in *loco parentis*. Dickens associates, on the other hand, human warmth with the proper supply of food. In the good family set up, mealtimes, like physical affection, express a shared life. The sharing of food is a sign of equal relations, so Oliver's desire for more food is an expression of his desire for more love and proper care. Meals thus transfigure into symbols of denied communal love, as well as the lost ideals of a domestic family in childhood. In his initial experiences with Fagin's gang, Oliver's familial attraction is induced by the appearance of Fagin as a domesticated father, cooking and attending the washing. This home provides, as Gold points out, a "satiric counterpoint" to law-abiding Christian society (Gold 1972: 51). Dickens also exploits the grotesque imagery of food to give comic intensity to the criminal underworld. The convivial spirited nature of both Master Charley Bates and Toby Crackit is associated with the hearty consumption of alcohol and food. "Toby continued to eat with the utmost outward indifference, until he could eat no more [...]" (Dickens 1999: 195). But it is Fagin who first provides comfort food to Oliver when taken to his den by Jack Dawkins: "There was […] two or three pewter pots: a loaf and butter: and a plate. In a frying pan, which was on the fire […] some sausages were cooking" (Dickens 1999: 60-61). This public display of food in abundance signals the sensory excess of the carnival body that the upper-world signifying order controls or represses.

Because utopian musicals project a collective ethos into a fantasy space, *Oliver!* amplifies the spectacle of food in abundance into a unifying ideal of home. Oliver's arrival into the lower echelons of London is ushered by the Artful Dodger, singing, "Consider yourself one of the family [...] /There isn't a lot to spare /Who cares? /What ever we've got we share!" (Bart 1960: 36-47). The focus is on sharing food and a sense of familial space despite the hardships. This song then merges into an encore chorus which attracts the miscellaneous denizens of an obscure London back-street community. Dickens frequently associates disorder with collective affection and order with emotional systematic coldness. The romantic image of the criminal underworld is accentuated with public display of food and energetic physical exertions. The market place in *Oliver!*, which provides the backdrop to carnivalesque feasting and choreographed dancing, is

visually paralleled in the screen image of a commercial urban village in *Scrooge* (1970). Such scenes are reflective of Dickens' enumerative details on the plentiful supply of food, thus echoing Rabelais' world of feasting. In *A Christmas Carol*, Christmas Present is described as seated on a throne of heaped food: turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oyster, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch (Dickens 1984: 69). Modelled on the Norse God, Odin, he is the ultimate green pagan god that exemplifies the narcotic, joyfully penetrating wholeness of nature. He is the epitome of positive carnivalesque elements.

4. The Dionysian Dance of Death

The celebratory mood is one side of Dickens' carnivalesque. Food and drunken revelry is associated with warm chaos that asserts shared communality, in which social status vanishes between the upper and lower spheres. But there is also a sinister side to the carnivalesque, embodied in Bill Sikes and the city that gathers around him. Exuding a physical vibrancy, which inhabits the urban spaces of a carnival underworld, Sikes is a threatening Dionysian anomaly in the carnivalesque mode. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque allows for a forgetting of oneself as one merges with the spirit of collective otherness, and *Scrooge* highlights a link between denying the carnivalesque with the repression of life's collective joys. In many respects, Bakhtin's theory is derivative of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the folk roots within the Dionysian ethos of music, as stated in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1870), which also relates spontaneous and primal experiences with pre-civilised communal festivals. Fundamental to the Dionysian ritual is a dithyramb, an ancient Greek choric hymn of a wild and physical character sung to Dionysus, communicating a sense of the universal beyond the limited individual perspective, and evoking an intoxicating sensation of self-abandoning ecstasy:

> Under the influence of the narcotic potion hymned by all primitive men and peoples […] those Dionysiac urges are awakened, and as they grow more intense, subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self. In medieval Germany, too, the same Dionysiac power sent singing and

> dancing throngs, constantly increasing, wandering from place to place [….] Some people, either through a lack of experience or through obtuseness, turn away with pity or contempt from phenomena such as these as from 'folk diseases', bolstered by a sense of their own sanity; these poor creatures have no idea how blighted and ghostly this 'sanity' of theirs sounds when the glowing life of Dionysiac revellers thunders past them (Nietzsche 1993: 17).

Like the carnivalesque music of Christmas, the supra-rational Dionysian festival induces a state of self-abnegation as one merges with the dancing crowd. Yet as Terry Eagleton points out in *Holy Terror*, the flipside to this is the frightful dance of death: "It is a dark parody of carnival – a jubilant merging and exchange of bodies which like the carnival is never far away from the graveyard" (Eagleton 2005: 4). The mythopoeic power of the Dionysian carnival offers a mysterious primal oneness, but its excess is also born out of pain and dismemberment which can lead to self-oblivion.

Bill Sikes represents what Nietzsche refers to (above) as the "dark parody of the carnival", a "folk disease" which threatens the "sanity" of the civilised order. In *Oliver Twist*, Sikes is visualised as symbiotic with the physical and exotic environ of the criminal underworld. Sikes is at the epicentre of the city's labyrinthine metaphor; and, as the narrator crosses an unfamiliar border of the city, the language immediately senses the strangeness of this alternative world (Moretti 1998: 84). This is also the strangeness of an alternative self that disturbs the acceptable face of society. Accordingly, Nancy's death is shrouded in the apocalyptic and gothic miasma of darkness, one which anticipates the chiaroscuro of noir or German Expressionist films:

> Of all the bad deeds that, under cover of darkness, had been committed within wide London's bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst. Of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel. (Dickens 1999: 384)

A horrible violent murder is equated with the amoral decadence of an underworld, which ambivalently also occupies the jouissance of a

carnivalesque urban space. Dickens is quick to sensationalise the Dionysian excess, as if sharing in a primitive delight of the obscene, by multiplying the gore of blood and mutilated flesh, and by caricaturing Sikes's subsequent descent into the bowels of an oblique London. Sikes races through "a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets", and is chased by the spectral image of his own gothic doppelganger – God's retributive providence (Dickens 1999: 403). Before Sikes meets his end, hoist by his own petard, he traverses the urban terrain of his geopolitical origins, places that are familiar to his eyes but murky to the reader. This is the carnivalesque underworld that Sikes once terrorised, but which now ensnares him as though caught in the bowels of hell. Now the pursuing mob is symbiotic with a devouring milieu – both are united in body: "[It] seemed as though the whole city had poured its population out to curse him" (Dickens 1999: 411). Even Sikes' death is described in carnivalesque terms with a roaring mass of people pressed together in the narrow murky depths of London, "striving" with "cries and shrieks" to witness his downfall (Dickens 1999: 411-412). Sikes' death is described as a steep fall into the abyss of London: "He fell for five-and-thirty feet" (Dickens 1999: 412). This is a mythological death, in which the mouth of the underworld opens wide to swallow up the grotesque monster to which it gave birth. The melodramatic grandeur of Sikes' demise mirrors Rabelais' grotesque images of bodies devoured by the larger body of a material world, suggesting the carnivalesque underworld of Dickens' London consumes its own decadent excess in order to restore its exhausted body.

Like Scrooge, Sikes embodies the emotional coldness of the death-drive. However, Scrooge eventually commits to the collective joys of the carnivalesque. But, because Sikes is a "dark parody of carnival", he is the dance of death that accompanies the intoxication and dismemberment of Dionysus. His powerful physical presence marks the feral bond he has with Nancy. Their contradictory relationship makes him both agreeable and discordant with the carnivalesque underworld. Screen musical adaptations of *Oliver Twist*, whilst realising the reviving theme of the carnivalesque, struggle to present this disturbing ambivalence and so demote Sikes to a figure of un-redeemed evil villainy. In the original theatrical production of *Oliver!*, Sikes is given a song, 'My Name', in which he sings of the general fear he incites in people: "Strong men tremble when they hear it! / They've got cause enough to fear it! / It's much blacker than they smear it! / Nobody

mentions my name […] My name!" (Bart 1960: 90-93). Sikes sings this part as he slowly descends the stairs into the tavern. Again, unspeakable criminality is spatially aligned with a descent below the familiar urban iconography. Yet, Sikes is at odds with the physical and sensual unity of the carnivalesque space – he ignores Nancy's caresses and threatens any man with violence who reciprocates her flirtations that are a sign of her over-flowing generous spirit. Sikes disturbs the Dionysian collective energy/orgy of the underworld, because he expresses what Eagleton calls the "horrific jouissance" of Dionysus – the violence of the grotesque, the reviled malevolent force that reaps enjoyment in death-dealing and dismemberment, or the monster of the Id contained in carnival excess (Eagleton 2005: 3-4). At the heart of the carnivalesque is this fundamental ambiguity: liberating excess and demonic lawlessness. In his appetite for annihilation, Sikes has become a distinct afterlife myth, a Gothic killer of Sweeney Todd's stature. Family-orientated screen musicals present Sikes as an amoral urban gothic villain, denying him a song that would give him an inner dramatic voice. However, to separate Sikes from the jubilant energy of the carnivalesque is to conceal his mythological, generic, spatial or geopolitical identity, and to conceal the dark parody of the carnival that lurks beneath its joyful surface.

5. Blood Glorious Blood

In Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd*, the dark other-side of carnival intoxication is expressed as a spectacle of gothic violence and the macabre excess of torture or mutilation. The harmonious body-politic is replaced by fractured, grotesque body images to symbolise the psychological frustrations and revenge of the criminalised underworld. In *Oliver!*, the carnival spirit expresses the revivification of an old social order, but in *Sweeney Todd* the rupturing of bodily unity is a reflection of how the primal within the lower order can devour and physically subvert a corrupt order represented in the upper-world. Instead of food glorious food we are given a carnivalesque supply of blood glorious blood. Burton was drawn towards Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's 1979 stage musical, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, because he was excited by the "combination of horror movie and musical", and the multiple murders and cannibalism did not make it the most obvious choice for musical adaptation (Salisbury 2008: 6). Conventional utopian musicals express themes of conformity, but Sondheim wanted to convey the idea that nonconformity in

society is "a fairly common theme" too (Everett 2002: 205). Burton also frequently shows a fascination for the horror of conformity, as well as the fear of the other, the sympathy for the outsider or the monster with a sensitive soul, as typified in his Gothic romantic Fairytale, *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). Burton's screen adaptation is in many ways an examination of Sweeney Todd as "a dark and hungry god" (Salisbury 2008: 174). In drawing from the sensory exuberance and excess of the musical genre and the horror movie, Burton realises the extremities of the carnivalesque. He also articulates what Guy Barefoot regards as a classic Hollywood tradition of London iconography, one which foregrounds the dark, strange, remote corners of the city as gothic noir – sensationalised violence which ruptures the film's mise-en-scene (Barefoot 2001: 56-69). The film is also a realisation of the novel as a grotesque body, with its heteroglossia of gothic intertextuality, revelling in various aesthetic roots and inter-media sources that refract its multi-dimensional texture. As a musical that indulges in a hybrid spectacle of the decadent, degraded and depraved city, it also belongs to a genre established by John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), which parodies the opulence of operatic masque-scenes by merging vernacular dialogue with complex musical counterpointing. Gay's decadent opera is also a precursor to the Victorian urban gothic, in representing the criminal underworld that was born out of a new urban space:

> [The] poorer quarters of London were warrens of filthy alleyways and narrow, dark courtyards bordered by ramshackle tenements known as 'rookeries', crammed from cellar to garret with tenants paying a rent of shilling or eighteen pence a week (Nietzsche 1993: 13).

From a lower world of poverty and crammed squalor, Gay captures the vibrancy of a criminal underworld whilst also exposing the ironies of a divided world and society's rapacity: "Every one of us preys upon his neighbour, and yet we herd together" (Nietzsche 1993: 98-99). Whilst visually alluding to Gay's period romp, Burton presents a similar cynical view of human nature and the mechanism of justice, by enhancing the operatic excess to multiply the gothic excess.

As a legendary serial-slasher, who conveniently deposits his victims in an underground network of secret tunnels, Sweeney Todd is a demonic god of the Gothic Victorian criminal underworld. As Fred Botting argues, in Gothic literature, the excess of horror is most often experienced in underground vaults or burial chambers (Botting 1996: 75). At the very heart of *The String of Pearls: A Romance* narrative is the extended metaphor of a labyrinthine underworld, which signifies a carnivalesque horror of mutilation and cannibalism. The rapacious consumption of food is both integral to the carnivalesque vitality of the city and the hideous secrets that define the underworld's spatial orientation. In fact, unlike *Oliver Twist* there is less of a clear distinction between the upper-world and the lower-world for the story descends further into the bowels of the earth and further into the psychological depths of human nature, exploiting various spatial layers and parallels to express primitive violence as the return of the repressed. Sweeney Todd's barber shop lies near St Dunstan's church and Fleet Street. The geographical positioning is symbolic of how horrors of humanity are denied yet continue to lurk beneath the sacred edifice of society. St Dunstan conceals the rotting flesh of the dead, whilst Fleet Street sensationalises the exploits of criminals as everyday gothic villains. Sweeney maintains a respectable appearance as a servant to the upper world, but, like Sikes, is representative of a dismembering Dionysian underworld. And like Sikes, he too inhabits a labyrinthine network of grotesque, clandestine streets. Furthermore, when Sweeney is pursued and loses his way, he, like Oliver, descends beneath the familiar surface of the city to encounter a criminal fraternity:

> Their looks were often an index to their vocations, for all grades of the worst characters were there, and some of them were by no means complimentary to human nature, for there were some of the most desperate characters that were to be found in London (Mack 2007: 58).

Again, the narrative exploits the spatial trope of the underworld as the decadent and degraded other that threatens to disembowel or expose the familiar.

Mrs Lovett's bake-house is also described as the epitome of the carnivalesque underworld, which exposes the grotesque ironies of the

upper-world. The strange toxic smell of cooked human flesh pervades the shop's surroundings, and beneath the familiar streets a vast Gothic factory of vaults and chambers processes the meat for human consumption. Here her victims, such as Jarvis Williams, resemble other entrapped Gothic victims, such as Dickens in a blacking factory, Oliver in a coffin, or Jane Eyre in the red room:

> These [a flight of stairs] she descended, and Jarvis Williams followed her, to a considerable depth, after which she took an iron bar from behind another door, and flung it open, showing to her new assistant the interior of that vault [….] (Mack 2007: 97)

But here the Gothic tyranny is multiplied into an excess of monstrous proportions: the underworld manufactured by Lovett and Todd functions as an efficient factory and bears the demeanour of a devouring mythological beast or a living vortex of death: "There is but one miserable light, except the occasional fitful glare that comes from the ovens where the pies are stewing, hissing, and spluttering in their own luscious gravy" (Mark 2007: 93). The ovens are described in carnivalesque terms: a hyperbolic caricature that symbolises the disintegration of the body. This is the hideous secret of the carnivalesque that Lovett's customers are not privy to as they salivate over the carnivalesque joy of food:

> What a scampering of feet is there, what a laughing and talking, what a jostling to be first [….] Is it a fire? is it a fight? No, the enjoyment is purely one of a physical character, and the all the pacing and racing – all this turmoil and trouble – all this jostling, laughing, and shouting, is to see who will get first to Lovett's pie-shop (Mark 2007: 29).

Outwardly, this scene appears to be akin to the carnival merriment experienced in *A Christmas Carol*. Food becomes a source of celebration, uniting higher ranking citizens of the nearby legal establishments into a communal physical rush. At the same time, however, the lower and upper worlds collapse into each other, as the happy bustling carnivalesque crowd commit a collective act of unwitting cannibalism. Implicit in the text is the

cynical view of a corrupt metropolis and its rapacious populace that echoes the message of *The Beggar's Opera*. As victims of a vast consuming city they too devour and are devoured; herded together they prey upon each other in a feasting frenzy. Gay's view of a patronage system that ensnares all its conspirators is transformed into a view of society as a parasitic food chain, gripped by competitive greed, one which is equated to cannibalism. For what we eat is what we are, and it is a dog eat dog world.

First impressions of Tim Burton's screen adaptation suggest that the director has set out to highlight the text's theme of cannibalism by exploiting the gore and physical violence that derive from a cinematic tradition of horror, which includes vampire, zombie and slasher movies. However, one scene in particular epitomises the film's projection of a hybridic carnivalesque mode that has been inherited via an urban gothic discourse. It is conveyed as a dialogic duel, which pits the other-side of the carnivalesque against a more celebratory cinematic version of grotesque realism. Mrs Lovett takes Sweeney to St Dunstan's market to see the mountebank, Adolfo Pirelli, who has a jovial Italianate persona, and selling to a crowd his magical hair-loss cure, a miracle elixir. We see a gathering of people representing the different corners of society – a temporary lapse in class divides. Even the nefarious Beadle Bamford makes an appearance, a sidekick to the Judge - so representative of authority. The boy, Toby, who serves Pirelli, sings like a cockney urchin from *Oliver!*, whilst Pirelli adds a dazzling colour to the drab image of the dirty homogenous-looking crowd. As Toby sings in enervating terms of Pirelli's product, Sweeney and Lovett provide counter-satirical voices: "It smells and tastes like piss" (Burton 2008). The mise-en-scene is expressive of the carnivalesque connectivity typified in *Oliver!* and *Scrooge*, which romanticise the excesses of the urban underworld. The musical counterpointing is expressive of another attribute that Bakhtin regarded as defining the carnivalesque: the dialogic that destabilises overblown discourses. Todd debunks the performing trickster who bewitches the crowd via commercial rhetoric. Transported to Australia for a crime he never committed, Todd is seen as a Gothic victim, who occupies a homeless space of non-identity. His otherness eventually takes charge of the all-encompassing environ of this particular mise-en-scene via a shaving duel in which Pirelli sings 'The Contest'. Sent to the underworld of Australia, Todd returns like a fallen angel to claim a small victory over the upper-world. The scene also dramatises a contest in which the "dark

parody of the carnival" overcomes the sentimental extravagance of Pirelli's self-posturing and celebratory screen musicals.

Tim Burton's screen adaptation augments the sensationalised myth of Sweeney Todd as a serial-slasher exulting in sadistic ultra-violence, by amplifying the "horrific jouissance" of carnivalesque excess. The film visually exploits the extended spatial metaphor of the divided worlds to foreground the alignment of Todd's carnage with the unhealthy body or the atavistic terrors of the city, which the upper-world denies and conceals. During the opening credits of the film we see blood flowing through the underground tunnels of a sewage system. This is a cynical comment on how society systematically conceals the painful/unpalatable truths of human nature in a way that imitates our habit of depositing shit down the toilet. The gothic underworld of vaults and bloody death chambers is equally expressive of what remains psychologically concealed, such as hidden dark desires. The deadpan songs, sung by Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter, further enhance the gothic nihilism. In the first song, Todd, returning from Australia, likens the whole of London to a decadent underground world: "There's a hole in the world / Like a great black pit /And the vermin of the world inhabit it / And its morals aren't worth / What a pig could spit / And it goes by the name of London" (Salisbury 2008: 106). The film instantly strikes up Sweeney's vengeful and depressive mood, associating the iconography of London with corruption and evil – a dual identity expressed in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Whereas in *Oliver Twist* the criminal underworld is finally transfigured into a repentant hell, however, Todd pictures both the spatial/social worlds of London as standing for a terrifying void of a meaningless and valueless civilisation.

All the residual aspects of a primitive human nature, which occupy the lower world, are metaphorically aligned with the spectacle of a vast city that devours its populace like Lovett's ovens. The film's colourless cinematography not only enhances the Gothic overtones that have shaped a cinematic tradition, but also supports Sweeney's nihilistic cynicism, which exposes the civilising conceit of London. For we are soon made aware of how Judge Turpin's maddening lust for Sweeney's wife, Lucy, ignited a trail of murderous revenge that mirrors closely the tragedy of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1590s) and its Ovidian precedent – the Tereus/Philomela myth: "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than

Procne I will be revenged" (Shakespeare 2001: 159). Judge Turpin represents the decadence of high society and the corrupt mechanism of justice – he is the classic Gothic tyrant, and also the lecherous Tereus equivalent. Sweeney is the Titus/Procne equivalent, whose need for revenge exceeds the poetics of justice. Increased passion multiplies violence, and all are finally consumed by vengeful hate. Tim Burton exploits the mytheme of all-consuming emotional and physical aggression to capture the multivalent layers of psychological and brutal excess. Hence London's underworld is transfigured into a synecdoche of the Freudian death-drive that underpinned the spatial ironies of the original Gothic narrative.

By amplifying the grotesque physical metaphor of a carnivalesque lower-world, Burton also visually enhances the spatial parallels located in *The String of Pearls*, to give a stronger impression of the criminal underworld exploiting its own physical domain to both conceal and expose the hidden ironies of a parasitic food chain, which sustains and supplies the livelihood of the upper-world populace. It is soon made clear that Sweeney's shaving parlour is situated directly above Lovett's meat pie shop, which in turn is located directly above her bake-house, located adjacent to London's sewage system. This mirrors the hierarchy of the class system, people from the underworld serving powers above, looking more like half-dead zombies or the morlocks in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) that prey on the living in the luxurious above-world. Sweeney's unfocused need for vengeance and salvation is expressed as class revenge on an unjust higher world. Whilst Sweeney and Lovett serve their loyal customers, to keep up a public system of supply and demand, they serve each other in a partnership of crime, in which one supplies the illegal resources for the profits of edible consumption. The film exploits a Rabelaisian system of grotesque images in which body image devour each other to reflect on a corrupt system that conceals its inhumane supply-line. Burton also exaggerates the spatial positioning of the camera to express the mutual hostility between the two divided worlds. During one of the initial scenes, we see Johanna, Todd's daughter, behind a window looking wistfully outwards to the wider world. She describes her room as a cage with many rooms, in which she is Judge Turpin's ward and the object of his voyeuristic desires (Salisbury 2008: 116). Johanna is viewed as one more entrapped gothic victim, tyrannised by the forces of the establishment. Turpin is also referred to as a "pious vulture of the law", as if a bird of prey feeding on the

dead (Burton 2008). The film continually conflates the evils of gothic villainy with the macabre horrors of consumption. When Johanna later tries to elope, she, like Tobias in the original text, is locked away with other female blondes in the dingy, foul pit of Mr Fogg's asylum. Ironically, their lucrative hair is a resource for the court wigs of London's judges. When Johanna is freed, the female victims of Bedlam turn against Mr Fogg, a veritable legion of Dracula's vampiresses. By foregrounding the gothic heteroglossia of the Sweeney Todd myth, Burton, through various visual allusions that operate as spatial parallels, highlights the Freudian implications of cannibalism. The two divided worlds feed off each other, and the physical horror concealed within the underworld is reflective of the horror that the upper-world of society represses and conveniently exploits. The symbolic inversion of Mayhew's classification of parasitic indolent criminals constitutes a carnivalesque role reversal, where the upper-world is perceived as a parasite feeding off helpless social victims and criminalising the dispossessed to legitimise an exploitative hierarchy.

The theme of class and female gothic revenge is also channelled through the grotesque metaphor of consumption. Compared to the original narrative ending, the film's finale expresses the self-destruction or death-drive of a carnivalesque excess that ultimately exhausts itself. Burton visually expresses the physical aspects of disintegration, mirroring the apocalyptic annihilation of *Titus Andronicus* in which Tamora "like to the earth [swallows] all her increase" (Shakespeare 2001: 159). There is no folk merriment, festive revival or social restoration. For Bakhtin, hell is a "banquet" or a "gay carnival", and the hero of the netherworld is a "gay monster" (Bakhtin 1965: 391-395). Todd too becomes the gay monster of a hellish banquet. With the mise-en-scene saturated in blood, the film gorges on the sensory excess of grotesque consumption and bodily destruction in order to parody and debase equivalent cinematic scenes of musical carnivalesque. The blood begetting echoes the flesh eating frenzies of zombie films, but more significantly it satirically counterpoints the reviving feeding festivals and whirligigs of fun depicted in *Oliver!* and *Scrooge*. As in Bakhtin's description of Rabelais' novel [name the text], "the image of death is devoid of all tragic or terrifying overtones" (Bakhtin 1965: 407).

Unlike the carnivalesque of Rabelais' world, birth and death do not meet in this final scene of total self-oblivion. The Beadle is the first to be liquidated, followed by Turpin. Lucy is then mistakenly dispatched by

Sweeney, who then throws Mrs Lovett into the flames of her meat pie oven (because she had lied about Lucy's death). Thereafter Sweeney has his throat cut by Toby, and his blood trickles onto the face of Lucy in an embrace that grotesquely echoes the all-consuming passion of Heathcliff's necrophilic desire for mutual self-dissolution alongside the corpse of Cathy in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Todd's embrace of physical unity expresses the violent exchanging and merging of bodies within the dismembering carnival. The film's graphic portrayal of human flesh devoured, dismembered, or mutilated underscores the underworld as a metaphor for the intimately connected themes of eating and human cannibalistic consumption. As in *Oliver Twist*, the underworld swallows up the excess of a banquet as the crescendo of consuming desires reaches a death-driven apotheosis. The musical score and dancing seems to fuel the sensory excess of gothic sensationalism and visual horror. Sweeney and Turpin sing together as if sharing a common sentiment towards "pretty women" (Burton 2008). Sweeney and Lovett dance together in dizzy, intoxicating circles, as though sharing the same carefree attitude towards death and the evils of their dreadful deeds. Like Sikes and Titus, who also played the cook, Lovett is hoist by her own petard when consumed within the flames of her human-baking oven. For Bakhtin, eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body and its interaction with the world. "[The] body transgresses here its limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense." (Bakhtin 1965: 281) In Rabelais' novels, the final scenes of banqueting are joyful and triumphant; an expression of merging with the world and triumphing over the world. As Bakhtin reiterates, the limits between man and the world are erased, with man devouring the world without being devoured himself (Bakhtin 1965: 278-281). However, the final scene of devouring in *Sweeney Todd* is a feeding frenzy of Dionysian intoxication. Having inherited the literary and cinematic tradition of the urban gothic, Burton presents a more disturbing image of how closely the "horrific jouissance" lurks beneath the celebratory upper-world of the carnivalesque. The only way to read the carnival's laughter as conquering fear is if we interpret the bloodshed as a total cathartic/nihilistic release from a monomaniacal quest for revenge, and pent up emotions which have physically and psychologically tormented Sweeney Todd: "The violence of the horror film is [...] the attempt to return to a zero state." (Crane 1994: 32)

6. Utopian Musical or Dystopian Gothical

Representing a nostalgic return to a hyper-realist development of neo-Victorian imaginary, together *Oliver!* and *Sweeney Todd* fulfil the dual nature of the carnivalesque, a generic stylisation integral to gothic urban realism. However, in transforming the positive dynamics of liberating carnival space from *Oliver Twist* into jubilant cathartic entertainment, *Oliver!* makes invisible the social divides that threatened to disturb the old social order. As Newey argues, Dickens' view of the criminal underworld as carnival other was also a "licensed affair" or "permissible rupture", where ultimately moral punishment restores social order (Newey 2004: 90). On the other hand, in releasing the excess of the dark carnival, Burton's dystopian musical heightens the violence of the carnivalesque that threatens to consume every participant. As Sharon Weltman argues, the film musical offers an "even bleaker conclusion than the stage musical" (Weltman 2009: 308). Devouring the disciplining upper-world into the criminal carnival body expresses the non-conformist ritual of reversal, while also underscoring the nihilistic politics of deconstructive postmodernism. For the stage musical, Sondheim interprets the mass murder as inspired by the rhetoric of a class struggle – a psychological rupture of the socially repressed. This represents, as Peter Womack would put it, "the vengeful hour of the unconscious [or] the antithetic release of the libidinal [....] the lurid extremism of the impulses" (Womack 1980: 136).

Johnny Depp's nihilistic self-consuming rage continues this theme of class trauma, whilst expressing the disillusionment of a post-industrial age that has lost the ideals of an ideological struggle to a consumer-led mass culture already fatted on visions of carnival conformity. The nature of postmodern culture is cannibalistic in terms of commodified pastiche, especially when feeding off the generic traditions of Victorian culture, the penny dreadful, melodrama, and the sensation novel. Todd's 'gothical' musical, as an extreme example of grotesque self-parodic hyper-realism, aligns Sweeney Todd's death-wish to the death-drive inherent in the feeding frenzy of neo-Victorian hybridity. The recent opening of a Disney-style Dickens' theme park, *Dickens World*, in Kent, and the BBC's recycling of *Oliver!* as a Saturday night musical talent show (with Andrew Lloyd Webber as star judge), *I'd do Anything* (2008), affirms Dickens' status as a fat postmodern commodity-sign and the perhaps (or not yet) exhausted limits of neo-Victorian indulgence. Carnival parody has been imaginatively

embraced because it constitutes another hyperreal dimension of what Jean Baudrillard terms the "simulated generation of difference" (Baudrillard 1983: 4).

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