

ARREST FOR ATTEMPTED STREET THEATRE

In this narrative, Chris Knight and Camilla Power recount their experiences, and their rationale, for actions leading up to their arrest on 28 April, the day before the Royal Wedding. Unlike some countries, Britain does not operate under lese-majesty laws, and the theatrical performances by these two anthropologists have generally been taken in good humour, both by their audiences and by the authorities.

On a beautiful May Day morning – that day of the year when pagan, anarchist and socialist hope springs eternal – we were wondering whether to join the festivities on London’s historic Clerkenwell Green. Step onto the Green and we’d be liable to arrest under bail conditions which had been imposed on us following 25 hours detention at Lewisham Police Station, southeast London.

What had we done to be banished from the sacred Mayday space? Nothing . . . yet. We had been picked up in one of the pre-emptive raids during what activists call the ‘Great Royal Wedding Purge’. Britain’s police were busy arresting people whom they suspected of *thinking* about doing something.

Journalists have covered this story in terms of the right to free speech. But we had no intention of making speeches – surely, the wedding day was time for ritual celebration and participation? As anthropologists, we combine Darwinian and Durkheimian models on the evolution of ritual; joint ritual action in Durkheim’s view being a necessary condition for language to work. Performative deeds precede and provide the necessary scaffolding for speech. In activist mode, we put such theories to empirical test, staging street theatre in order to move into and around politically contested spaces during ritually charged cracks in time. With a motley crew known as the Government of the Dead, we’ve worn silly costumes, devised ways to hang and decapitate effigies, spilt fake body fluids, committed mock cannibalism, cast spells, bodypainted, sung and danced badly. On this occasion, the ritual we felt most comfortable with involved a guillotine.

On 28 April 2011, the eve of Prince William’s wedding, several police vehicles swooped down on a south London street corner to arrest this theatrical troupe.¹ Suddenly we were in the midst of the most extraordinary street theatre yet. What’s so exciting is that you never know who is going to turn up and take part. The police were in costume, apart from the detective and shifty undercover surveillance; we were distinctly underdressed in moth-eaten jumpers and scruffy T-shirts. We’d been moving theatrical props – some quite heavy. The police seemed well rehearsed, stringing themselves into a line, backing us steadily against a London brick wall. Slyly, they encircled a white van towards which they suspected we were walking.

We waited to be auditioned as the suited detective flashed his badge and pointed to some of us, rebuffing others – ‘no, he’s alright’ – as if casting us for roles. One comrade who happened to be already in fancy dress got

picked on; as did the pair of us. By a stroke of fortune, a Channel 4 documentary team and an independent filmmaker were on hand to film the episode. A friend commented later that more police officers had been needed to arrest us than to arrest the Krays!²

The police, who had been able to gather evidence from TV interviews,³ suspected that we were conspiring to dress up for the wedding (Fig. 1). Chris had been going to wear his Mister Mayhem costume, with top hat, dark glasses, and trickling vampire blood; Camilla, as Queen Marie Antoinette with pompadour wig and zombie make-up neck-wound, had intended to hand out ‘tombstone’ cake to zombies gathered on Central London’s Soho Square while haunting the precincts of a 12-foot wooden guillotine in an urban guerrilla parody of the divine kingship ritual of Nemi grove (Frazer 1994: 11). The police wanted help with their enquiries about the superbly crafted guillotine, which was decked with red and black flags either side of the legend ‘Some Cuts Are Necessary’. This they had found in the van with a caricature dummy of Prince Andrew, who was adorned with cardboard cut-out insignia of the Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order.

This august decoration had in fact been pinned onto the flesh-and-blood Andrew by his mum in an investiture on 26 March. That Saturday, Central London had been taken over by a giant Trades Union Congress (TUC) march; no one had noticed the goings-on at court. Some royal rituals are best kept under wraps, it seems.

After the drama on the street, the procedural boredom of the booking-in at the police station, and then, the royal dungeon: the perpetual fluorescent glare which never acknowledges circadian rhythm, the hard and sticky plastic mattress, the steel loo, the ‘cushion’ on the ledge which cannot be angled right to rest your neck comfortably . . . even a numb doze is rudely disturbed by random clattering checks through the cell door aperture and call-outs for inedible meals. Complete with the demeaning requirement to ask humbly for every petty comfort, the experience had the special character of intermingling ‘monarchical’ and ‘disciplinary punishment’ (Foucault 1995).

Writing on such liminal states of sensory deprivation, Victor Turner (1967: 106) speaks of ‘the realm of primitive hypothesis’, in which one has the power to juggle with factors of existence. Could it be that the royal household, amid all the Kate/Wills mania, felt threatened? Could they really have thought their own pageantry challenged by our cardboard cut-out, straw-stuffed creations held together with cable

ties and gaffer tape? Had they let fall to their inner cabal, they would not be amused by any rival spectacle? The police, smarting from the anarchist breach of Charles and Camilla’s body politic, would have scrambled into action.

One myth only

The police’s main source about our alleged conspiracy, we discovered during our interviews, was an article in the *Sun* newspaper on 31 January 2011, splashed over the front page as ‘Hate-filled anarchists are plotting to wreck royal wedding’ (Francis 2011: 1). Inside, if you flicked past the page three beauty, you came across an unusually highbrow concoction for a tabloid. It began with an epigram from Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his world* and continued with a colour reproduction of detail from Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of earthly delights* taken from activist leaflets. Top-hatted Mister Mayhem lurched over a two-inch-high headline that read ‘WEDDING TRASHERS’, the latter word spelt with a lurid red anarchist ‘A’ (see Fig. 2). If you read on for some light-hearted entertainment, you’d have learnt of an astonishingly ambitious plot. For a period of one mad moon – from the TUC’s 26 March demo to the 29 April wedding – hordes of anarchists would lay siege to the capital, occupying police stations and barracks, erecting road-blocks, forcing the cancellation of the royal nuptials and precipitating the monarchy’s imminent collapse. The main prong of the attack would be led by an 18-foot Trojan horse flanked by balaclava’d unionized sex workers orchestrating a ‘right royal orgy’ in Parliament Square (Francis 2011).

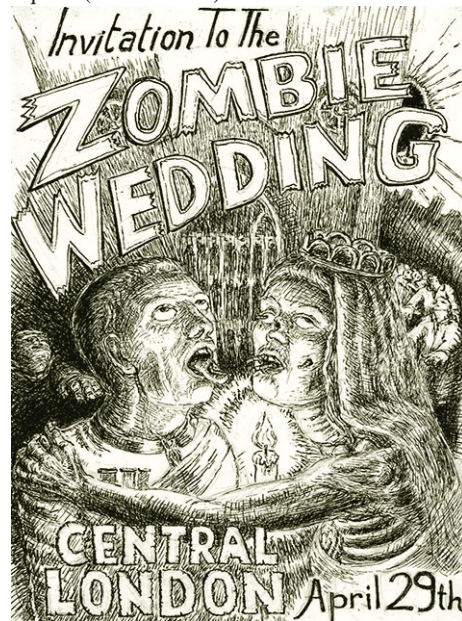


Fig. 1. Government of the Dead’s invitation to the Zombie Wedding on 29 April 2011.

The stories told by tabloid journalists appear as structurally constrained as magico-religious myths. Just as Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrates in *Mythologiques* that over 800 Amerindian myths turn out to be so many variations on One Myth Only, so the yarns spun by *Sun*, *Mail*, *Express* and *Evening Standard* hacks conform rigidly to a template. In the battle of good and evil, anarchists can only be portrayed as violent thugs with magical capabilities of sabotage and disruption, associated with scandalous sexual outrages. Tabloid readers can never be allowed to get the joke; if they started to titter at the absurdity of giant Trojan horses, tumbrils of royal effigies going to the guillotine, and anarchists actually getting out of bed to organize anything, they themselves would be infected with conspiracy through laughter. The censorship comes down like a firewall for fear of any such contagion.

We face a choice in dealing with that censorship. Either we stay silent and invisible, or we accept that for any message to get across at all, it must be couched in terms of comic-book malevolence and implausible violence. To puncture the media membrane, we must play pantomime roles of witches, ogres and forces of darkness. Our gamble is to bet on Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia – 'another's speech in another's language' (Bakhtin 1981: 324) – double-voiced discourse. Officialdom and its hacks can never blot out the manifold meanings of tongues telling ribald jokes.

What was extraordinary in this case was how the regime's enforcers fell hook, line and sinker for their own concoctions. They began believing the mythical scare stories they themselves had commissioned for fooling the masses! Their own conspiracy theories became the basis of evidence for conspiracy. Could this be Bakhtin's revenge – the regime's sense of humour failure signalling wider system failure?

The only good government is a dead government

The Government of the Dead is versed in lowdown miraculous tricks for transforming corpses into the stuff of feasts. It regularly rehearses a Rabelaisian carnival of bloodshed and dismemberment, ruthless slaughter 'transformed into a merry banquet', as Bakhtin puts it: 'bloodshed, dismemberment, burning, death, beatings, blows, curses and abuses – all these elements are steeped in "merry time", time which kills and gives birth' (Bakhtin 1984: 211). 'EAT THE BANKERS' was the slogan under which top-hatted Chris Knight/Mister Mayhem zombie-walked, urging fellow zombies to 'snack on bankers' brains' at the 1 April 2009 Financial Fools Day G20 Banquet at the Bank (Beachill *et al.* 2009).

The Government of the Dead's fearsome Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse first galloped out on Hallowe'en 2008 at Canary Wharf – Margaret Thatcher's skyscraper megamemorial to deregulation – on the pavement outside Lehman Brothers.⁴ Financial wizards – erstwhile 'Masters of the Universe' – scuttled off home that afternoon. While a new moon set over Canary Wharf dock, a coven of witches cast an opening ceremony amid a

circle of candlelit pumpkins, summoning the Horsemen from four directions to gyrate wildly to a samba band – Dancing on the Grave of Capitalism. But capitalism keeps rising from the grave, compelling us to bury it again and again. Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1920 novel *We* anticipates this: 'There is no final revolution. Revolutions are infinite' (Zamyatin 1993: 168). The Government of the Dead adheres to a lunar logic of death and resurrection – hence a lunar infinity of revolutions.

On Mardi Gras 2009, again dark moon, zombies went window-shopping down Oxford Street in a New Orleans-style funeral jazz procession to the 'hang-a-banker' event at Tyburn Tree/Marble Arch. Being indigenous London zombies, they also tossed bankers' brains in frying pans in a Zombie Pancake Race. The zombies kept trying and failing to haul the shop-dummy, bowler-hatted banker up onto the Marble Arch. Police egged the zombies on, 'nah, do it properly!' they cried. Their good humour on this occasion starkly contrasts with the cruel persecution of the zombie folk who turned up at Soho Square looking for breakfast on the day of the wedding.⁵

On May Day, 2010, the Saturday before the general election, the righteous justice of the Government of the Dead was visited on the party leaders.⁶ The Four Horsemen led processions from each party HQ to occupy Parliament Square. Cameron and Clegg were hanged from a sturdy gallows, while Brown was decapitated, blood spurting onto the lenses of press cameras. The longest procession came all the way from Clerkenwell; black bloc anarchists escorted a pint-sized Nick Griffin – much loathed leader of the British National Party – to be hung, drawn and quartered, then hurled to the crowd. After Death, miraculous new Life: a maypole was erected on Parliament Square and we danced in a wild whirl. The heavens opened. Two, three, five, ten tents were hurriedly pitched for cover and suddenly a camp mushroomed. This became Democracy Village, a tented premonition of Democracia Real Ya and, most recently, the Occupy movement. This camp held its ground until it was forcibly evicted on 20 July 2010.

The Government of the Dead had its initial brush with royal power at the State Opening of Parliament on 25 May 2010. As the queen's carriage rolled by, the Government of the Dead posted the Four Horsemen round a lurid pink faux Louis Quinze throne whereon sat Queen Tracy and King Tarquin. A homeless woman of regal bearing in Elizabethan costume, Tracy delivered an Alternative Queen's Speech, which was drowned out by the tolling of Westminster Abbey's bells. She and her husband, local to the Westminster/Vauxhall turf, were autochthonous inhabitants of Democracy Village. There from day one, they took raucous part in assemblies, and involved themselves in non-violent direct actions.

Democracy Village was truly a 'world turned upside down' with those lying in the gutter looking at the stars (Woods 2010). Royalty channels cosmic alignment between heaven and earth, ensuring that monarch and people move in step through cycles and seasons to keep the



Fig. 2. The Sun's double-page spread of 31 January 2011.

cosmos turning, bring the rains, and make the kingdom fertile. Cosmologic spectacle has long been the jealously guarded monopoly of royalty. Max Gluckman (1963: 112) argues that in traditional sacred systems where the system itself is not in dispute, dramas of rebellion and role reversal turn the world upside down only to return it back to where it was before. The implication is that if the rebellious ritual is not tolerated, as ours wasn't, the system does not at all feel sure of itself.

Grasping that royal power is the culmination of historical attempts to monopolize magic, the Government of the Dead makes its mission the redistribution of that magic, back to those from whom it has been stolen. Walter Bagehot (2001: 54) advised the constitutional monarchists of his time: that '[Royalty's] mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic.' Monarchy, he notes, is a government in which the attention of the nation is concentrated on one person doing interesting actions. On the contrary, says the Government of the Dead, we demand the right to perform interesting actions, and our fair share of ritual power.

The Government of the Dead, as Rabelaisian agitprop, asserts its rites in polarity to the rigid ceremonial of royal protocol. Its slogan – 'the only good government is a dead government' – sounds fundamentally anarchist. Yet it derives from an idea common to many cultures across the world. Those who live in the world, eating, drinking, and having sex, are necessarily corrupt, being susceptible to the temptations of the flesh; only once dead, as ancestors, can they be trusted (Lan 1985, Lattas 2006). To join the government, you must be dead. Lattas (2006: 129) describes how in East New Britain 'government, ...its projects and promises of sovereignty, civilization, and development, is displaced and re-mediated through the world of the dead'. The villagers have a strange belief: there must be justice somewhere in the world. The institutions of the living – governments, law-enforcement agencies, corporations and banks – are manifestly unjust. This is clearly

observed in the fact that all the cargo people produce flows the wrong way, from their villages towards the wealthy consumer world. Therefore justice can only be expected from the underworld, which operates with perfect mimetic logic – a mirror reflection of business in the world above – ensuring cargo flows back the right way, and justice is done (*ibid*: 130).

Taking our cue from this village-led resistance to world domination by the banks, we agitators – not yet dead – are mere agents, our comings and goings governed by lunar time and tide. Like Falstaff, autochthonous genius of English kingship, we are ‘minions of the moon; and let men say we be men of good government, being governed, as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal’ (Shakespeare 1987, Act 1, Sc. 2, l. 25-6). In stealing back what has been stolen from us, the Government of the Dead seeks to restore lunarchy – rule by the moon – to humanity, with ritual, sexual and economic exchange oscillating by lunar phase. We repeat: lunarchy, *not* ‘lunacy’ – that familiar patriarchal put-down.

Lunarchy’s essential logic is that no one wins or dominates for good. In the theatre of lunarchy, in one phase of the carnival cycle, the populace triumphs, in the other, the pin-striped, besuited bankers do. Among Central African forest hunter-gatherers, ‘sensual repartee between male and female ritual collectives’ animates the ‘political pendulum at the heart of the community’ (Finnegan 2009: 37). Each sex, under the moon’s sway, takes power in turn. To resolve the ritual tension would be to freeze this momentum, allowing hierarchy to flood back in. Drawing on this egalitarian expertise, let the shadow world government take the power in one phase – waxing moon – surrendering to the bankers’ regimes as the moon wanes.

No sterile zones

When the shadow world government was informed of the date set for William Wales and Catherine Middleton’s marriage, it was aghast. The dying days of the moon of April prior to May Day were cosmologically catastrophic! This bourgeois apology for a Saxe-Coburg royal house had really lost its ritual marbles. No young couple can marry successfully, fruitfully except at full moon – honeymoon. By contrast, dark moon conjures menstrual blood, kinship, witchcraft – all antithetical to marriage. Further, May Day is the time of popular fertility rites: not sex between newly weds but group sex between frolicking lads and lasses in the woods and fields. While the Metropolitan Police pledged to impose a ‘sterile zone’ around the wedding, the government realized it had a cosmic duty to supply the necessary erotic elements to overcome this threat to fecundity. Already back in November when the wedding date was announced in the heady aftermath of the trashing of Millbank Tory HQ, we found the ritual formula: *Royal Wedding + May Day holiday = Right Royal Orgy*.

Our calculation was informed by the anthropological theory and fieldwork that documents the need for death plus orgiastic sex to guar-

antee future fertility (Bloch & Parry 1982). Only those with a whetted appetite for death, prepared to celebrate it communally, can turn the wheel right round toward new life. The English revolutionary Commonwealth cut off the king’s head and then proceeded to kill much joy among the populace, abolishing Christmas and maypoles. No such Puritan ghosts could be allowed to dampen our royal spirits. How an orgy was to be achieved, the government’s agents weren’t certain, but the logic was compelling. In the event, the Zombie Group Wedding, Queer Resistance flashmob and fertility rites around the statue of Eros promised a solution. Except the event was prevented; the agents of zombie orgy were chucked in a dungeon, and the guillotine impounded under counter-terrorism laws. The Government of the Dead is now gravely displeased.

Afterword: Science on the street

Renouncing all ideologies, the Government of the Dead, through its agents in this world, invokes science as the basis of its operations. The science in question is, of course, anthropology: the study of what it means to be human. One hallmark of humanity is our ability to laugh at ourselves. Species-specific laughter is our joyful response to absurdity, to the ideal as it bumps into the real, to hypocrisy in the service of power. A thorn in the side of despots great and small, it’s the world’s primordial leveller.

Laughter is our evolved immune response to pomposity and naked dominance. The high and the mighty seek everywhere to cloak their rule in pageantry, mesmerism and magic. Their fiction is that they do not serve selfish interests but embody the cosmos as a whole. Within this scheme, those opposed to the prevailing arrangements must appear frenzied purveyors of chaos. The Government of the Dead’s manoeuvres on the eve of the royal wedding threatened to prick this bubble, unleashing enough merriment to drown out the tabloids’ ‘hate-filled anarchists’ narrative. Faced with two rival happenings, which might the populace choose? The pomp and circumstance of monarchy must be the only show in town. So the order went out: crack down on any competing spectacle.

How does an anthropologist attempt to analyze such an occasion – given the mass party of millions on the streets waving the carriages by, the billions tuning in on TV across the planet? What does participant observation mean in this instance? Should monarchist mesmerism be cast as pure irrationality opposed to the rationality of science? Bruno Latour (1999: 4) explodes the Cartesian myth of the scientist as a ‘brain in a vat’, forever condemned to gaze out on the world without influencing it. Bakhtin too makes short shrift of the myth in recognizing carnival laughter as: ‘a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic ...’ (Bakhtin 1981: 23).

Our fearless experiment ended up with us incarcerated and excluded from the wedding. While we were banged up, friendly British bobbies searched Chris’s house and car three times. In their frantic hunt for the maggots which they suspected might have been thrown as zombie confetti on the big day, they missed the crucial, incriminating evidence – a heavily annotated copy of *Rabelais and his world*. ●

Camilla Power

University of East London
c.c.power@uel.ac.uk

Chris Knight

Radical Anthropology Group
chris.knight@live.com

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1. Video of the arrest by oldchunkyhighs <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOli98fgBP0>.
 2. The Kray twins were notoriously violent crime lords in East London in the 1950s and 60s.
 3. Interviews broadcast on ITV’s *Daybreak*, 29 March, and 19 April 2011, and the Channel 4 *News*, 19 April, in which Chris described Government of the Dead street theatre as ‘a large-scale Punch and Judy show’.
 4. Lehman Brothers Inc. filed for bankruptcy on 15 September 2011, precipitating the current cycle of economic turmoil. The Government of the Dead was initially made manifest in response to this event. The Four Horsemen became known for leading four processions to the Bank of England on 1 April, 2009.
 5. Hannah Chutzpah (2011) offers a meticulous account of what the police – uniformed and undercover – did to the Zombie Starbucks Five. She notes how the zombies’ release from their cells was coordinated with the movements of the royal couple driving off in their wedding car – a ritual shadow world reflection. Bravely, the zombies rejected dismissive police suggestions to wash their faces and go home by doing a final zombie lurch outside Belgravia police station.
 6. Footage of Government of the Dead actions can be found on http://meltdown.uk.net/election/Government_of_the_Dead.html.
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