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The inverted logic as a source of carnival familiarity

Abstract. *In breaking away from the dominant rituals, the sanctioned church holidays, and traditional rules of behavior, the article analyzes the placement of carnival culture on the margins of official culture, the inversion of social principles introduced into a reality devoid of constitutive norms in normal life, eliminating any social division by reversing values and destroying the existing order. A historical perspective raises important questions about the unparalleled features of the carnival, including the combination of people, regardless of their social and intellectual differences. In line with the adoption of the culture of laughter and its tools, the dynamics of carnival managed to assume a reversal, degradation, grotesque, bottom-up logic in order to bring people together and facilitate their interpersonal relationships.*

Keywords: *carnival, mask, grotesque, laughter, Mikhail Bakhtin*

A very good starting point for understanding the major issue of the bottom-up logic proposed here, may be defining the selected aspects of carnival turmoil. To reconstruct the genesis of the carnival in a narrow sense of the word, it should be associated with the Bacchic rites in ancient Greece, as well as with the customs of the ancient Romans restoring the old cult of Saturn after winning the battle on Lake Trasimeno with a great feast. It should be remembered that it then became a holiday organized annually, with the date planned for the end of the calendar year. No citizen then dared to wear a toga or any other sign of dignity, but instead put on a tunic and a *pileus libertatis* cap, generally worn either by slaves or by freedmen.

In this context, the service was then relieved of its duties, while the competent state served it at meals. On the other hand, after sunset, crowds of people overwhelmed with unprecedented vigour to spread out various jokes and pranks, echoing the shout of *Saturnalia!* In the common consciousness of later centuries, the period called the golden age of Saturn remained – known as the time without wars, suffering, in which material and bodily abundance and excess reign. It is worth noting that even if Saturnalia does not pretend to be a carnival, after all, in its anti-hierarchical dimension, it intended to pave the way for other celebrations maintained in a similar convention. The actual carnival, on the other hand, should be associated with the last days before Lent, as well as before the period of all kinds of restrictions in terms of both meat eating and sexual relations, lasting until the arrival of Ash Wednesday.¹ Its distinctiveness was that it did not have an ecclesiastical character, because it neither brought glory to the authorities, nor was it a “celebration of victory” because of its deviation from all dogmatism and hierarchy.² Therefore, it was defined as a festival of plenty, during which people enjoyed all the joys of life.³ The main rite of the carnival is a huge parade spreading across the city, consisting of all the people willing to participate, including runners, dancers and singers. The beginnings of his organization go back to German cities and in most French cities, although he also manifested his symptoms elsewhere, which I will mention later. Members of the procession used to throw highly valued perfumed water, twigs, flowers or nuts on passers-by. Runners, in particular, were assigned to wear yawning pipes, filled with dust, capable of delivering several shots in succession. The musicians, on the other hand, beat the rhythm of the march with drums, and it was the flutists who led the dance.⁴ At this point, it would be worth presenting the dance theme and its key importance for the idea of carnival in general.

Dance in the Middle Ages, and even more so in the Renaissance, had an unfavourable opinion in the eyes of, above all, Church institutions, although it should be noted that this prejudice developed gradually. At the outset of the Middle Ages, the Christian church expanded its range of rule, as it tended to take into account the alterity of pagan customs and at least to some extent to annex certain customs when organizing its liturgy.⁵ This is what we can talk about in the case of dance, which has gained a universal scope in culture *par excellence*. With the domination of church power in Slavic lands, “dances to welcome the New Year now had to take place after the church service. Welcoming spring was associated with the cult of the Mother of God, dances in honour of Swantewit were combined with St. Vitus

¹ J. Heers, *Święta głupców i karnawały*, transl. G. Majcher, Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, Warszawa 1995, p. 158.

² J. Le Goff, *Kultura średniowiecznej Europy*, transl. H. Szumańska-Grossowa, Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen Warszawa 1994, p. 10.

³ J. Heers, *Święta głupców...*, p. 159.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 160–161.

⁵ I. Turska, *W kręgu tańca*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Iskry, Warszawa 1965, p. 127.

Cathedral, and the Kupala rituals became Midsummer Eve's."⁶ After all, dance, as it turned out, had a pejorative influence on the course of the liturgy, and strictly speaking it relaxed or even destroyed it.⁷ As a result, he was gradually banished from veneration and faith, the first expression of which was the prohibition of inappropriate dances on the occasion of the celebration of patron saints in 589 at the Synod in Toledo.⁸ This view was shared by many people of the church, starting with the gentle words of John Chrysostom declaring that: "God did not allow the feet to dance, but to walk humbly, and ending with the orthodox sentences of Sebastian Brant: »comes from the same devil who created the golden a bullock to take revenge on God«."⁹ Therefore, the Church officially condemned all dance rituals, except those organized in a very quiet form.¹⁰ This, in turn, placed him on the margins of official culture, thus situating him within the unofficial folk culture. Besides, the carnival in the Middle Ages, like laughter often equated with it, took on a rather marginal character, because, although it was legalized and the authorities knew about it and allowed its organizations, as well as many practices related to it, it had unofficial character.¹¹ In other words, this order "was beyond the threshold of all official forms of life and contacts."¹² Despite the critical attitude towards the institutions forming the customary framework of existence, it cannot be assumed that the carnival did not have a specific structure, if only logically that the antithesis is also a thesis. Seen from a slight different angle, one can agree with the thesis that the carnival has an incomparably more free structure than the official order, after all, it is governed by its laws – "the laws of carnival freedom."¹³ Through this approach, the articulated carnival freedom is nothing less than "a form of a second life for a people who for a certain time entered the utopian kingdom of universality, freedom, equality and abundance."¹⁴ Carnival took a form analogous to the meaning of the play. Johan Huizinga defines play as "an activity that runs in a certain order according to certain rules and brings to life social relationships which, on their part, are eager to surround themselves with secrets or employing disguises, emphasize their otherness from the ordinary world."¹⁵ In the quoted passage, it was not so much a period of social activity resulting from an attempt to depart from institutions sanctioning everyday life, such as the church or secular associations, but

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ J. Heers, *Święta głupców...*, p. 170.

⁸ I. Turska, *W kręgu tańca*, p. 127.

⁹ J. Heers, *Święta głupców...*, p. 49.

¹⁰ I. Turska, *W kręgu tańca*, p. 128.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 164.

¹² Ibidem, p. 145.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 64.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 66.

¹⁵ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. Zabawa jako źródło kultury*, transl. M. Kurecka, W. Wirpsza, SW Czytelnik, Warszawa 1985, p. 113.

above all, it was a form of utopian play. Let us add that the most important figures that perfectly fit into the originality of the carnival, also born of the folk culture of laughter, including the grotesque. It discovers “the possibility of the existence of some completely different world, another world order, a different structure of life, thus stressing that it frees from all forms of inhuman necessity.”¹⁶ By the same token, it dethrones this monolith through the liberation of consciousness, thoughts and imagination to create a new reality, the so-called “grotesque realism.”¹⁷ This realism derives its etymological genesis from an ornament found in Rome at the end of the 15th century during the excavation of Titus’ baths. It should be noted that this is where its origin comes from, namely from the Italian word “la grotto” – meaning grotto, underground. This ornament illustrated the game of plant, animal and human forms which “interpenetrate as if one gave birth to the other.” The world presented in it, instead of being habitually static, is constantly in motion, looking for a kind of ideal form. It is worth emphasizing that the outlined type of imagery, so free in its simplicity, is inextricably linked with the culture of laughter. The first manifestations of grotesque realism can be found in mythology and in the archaic art of all peoples, which are illustrated, among others, by terracotta from Kerch, comic masks, silenae, or statues of fertility demons. In the literature, however, it meant carnival-type celebrations, including satirical drama, old Attic comedy, or mimes, etc.¹⁸

Significantly, the forms of the crystallization of grotesque thought have one thing in common, namely “degradation.”¹⁹ In short words, it is about bringing down what is “high” bound in the carnival celestial sphere, while this “bottom” is identified by the notion of earth.²⁰ Both these designations can be comprehended both metaphorically and literally, taking into account that the boundaries of this division are intertwined because neither the first nor the second type of references can exist without each other. In the cosmological dimension, they are followed by the figures of death and birth.²¹ The above-mentioned “degradation” was distinguished by a perverse nature, as it gives birth to instead of killing, and thus links this process with the cyclical nature of nature. Nature, on the other hand, is situated within tangible things, what is corporeal by virtue of its birth. In the novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais, one can find many signs of carnival tinge concerning the bodily aspect, ostentatiously exposed. We are dealing here specifically with the “material-bodily element” in which – strictly speaking, hyperbolized images of the body, eating, drinking, defecation and even sexual life

¹⁶ M. Bachtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais’go a kultura ludowa Średniowiecza i Renesansu*, transl. A. Goreń, A. Goreń, Wydawnictwo Literackie 1975, p. 113.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

dominate.²² The “material-bodily element” is the fundamental basis of the carnival because it “opposes all abstract ideality, all claims to assign meanings that are independent and cut off from the earth and the body.”²³ This observation shows the antithetical attitude which guides grotesque realism towards the heavenly sphere, perceived in the public consciousness through the prism of the church institution. Making explicit reference to the logic of the reverse, and in the time perspective to the Roman period, one should recall one most important feature of the carnival connotation associated with the fact that a Roman citizen put on a *pileus libertatis* (*phrygian cap*) for the duration of Saturnalia – a symbol of freedom, a priori not serious, then inadequate for a person having the status of a citizen of Rome. In this situation, he gained the status of a jester – that is, paraphrasing Mikhail Bakhtin’s sentence “the unlawful bearer of immanently objective truth.”²⁴ One of the most important aspects of the “privileged” position of a jester is laughter, which was his most important weapon. Laughter was legalized, while remaining free from external restrictions, including the “pile.” The clown laugh thus took on a one-sided unofficial tone, positioned itself in opposition to the seriousness associated with the Christian cult and worldview. In the Middle Ages, however, the supporters of the Feast of Fools proved that the world is playful (clownish) instead of serious, and that laughter is “second nature to man.”²⁵ More specifically, this view was due to the existence of “exceptionally one-sided seriousness” concerning the Christian ritual and ecclesiastical hierarchy, in contrast to which, the “nature of the material-bodily laughter of rebirth and renewal” had to arise.²⁶ Hence, despite the fairly consistent condemnation by the “first doctors of the Church” of any games, entertainment and masquerades in holy places,²⁷ the Catholic Church had to accept semi-legal deviations from the rule of permanent sacrum.²⁸ Among the words to depart to the dogma of faith, one should consider consent to the violation of the sacred character of the liturgy, and even its travesty. It is because, during the December-January calendars, the church building was handed over, once a year, to the lowest clergy, in particular to canons, in a ritual called the Feast of Fools or Subdeacons. Let us remind you that the aforementioned feast was associated with the election by the canons from among themselves of one representative elected by acclamation, who turned into either a bishop or archbishop, or even a foolish pope. He, therefore, put on priestly robes, put a mitre on his head, took a crosier in his hand, and above all received a bishop’s cross borrowed for this occasion. Consequently, through the

²² Ibidem, p. 78.

²³ Ibidem, p. 79.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 169.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 148.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ J. Heers, *Święta głupców...*, p. 126.

²⁸ M. Bachtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais’go...*, p. 150.

sacred attributes in his rulership, he imparted a solemn blessing. On this occasion, he distributed wine abundantly to the altar boys and little servants of the church.²⁹

A similar situation can be distinguished in the context of the Feast of the Donkey, commemorating the flight on a donkey to Egypt of Saint Mary with the baby Jesus. Contrary to appearances, none of these characters was the focal point of the ceremony, but the accompanying draft animal – the donkey.³⁰ As Pierre de Corbeil, Archbishop of Sens writes, indeed “the main part of the iconoclastic ceremony was not so much the donkey itself as its degrading cry of »Hinham«.”³¹ Each part of the mass was crowned with that exclamation, and before the priest gave the blessing before the end of the mass, he exclaimed three times the “sacred” phrase “Hinham!” – in response, the participants of the mass responded with the same call. To identify the faces of the carnival tendencies in the Middle Ages, it is impossible to resist the impression that these iconoclastic examples, instead of usurping the right to create an antisacrum, constituted a travesty directed against a fossilized rite, where the judgment about the gravity of sin resulted from belonging to a social class and not to the universal truth.³² Both the Feast of the Subdeacons and the Feast of the Donkey took the form of a parody that was characteristic of that time. Proponents of the parody adopted as their motto ridiculing all imperfections, either of the cult or the church organization. The parody of laughter extended to all areas of life, reaching a universal character; as is the seriousness antagonistic to it. After all, the boundary moment between these two spheres is the tone. In the carnival, a serious tone was identified with death. It is also worth noting that “death in this system is by no means a negation of life (in its grotesque meaning – as the great body of popular universality). In this system, death enters the whole of life as its indispensable moment, as a condition for its constant renewal and rejuvenation.”³³ Not to mention that nowhere else than in the carnival the words of the priest’s blessing declared in the Feast of the Donkey attracted the nutritious Easter laughter (*risus paschalis*).³⁴ However, due to the situational context, it should have a uniform serious tone. The related linguistic profanation is distinctive of the reality of grotesque realism, called by Bakhtin the familiar fairground language.³⁵ Contrary to the official tone, this language was relied upon free contact between people, without allowing for any distance on the line of understanding. He set himself the goal of removing all differences and barriers that exist in normal life. This utopian

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 127.

³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 151–152.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 152.

³² Le Goff declares that „textbooks for confessors, which in the 12th century define sins, scruples of conscience – sins begin to be cataloged according to social classes.” J. Le Goff, *Kultura średniowiecznej Europy*, p. 272.

³³ Ibidem, p. 115.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 61.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 75.

assumption was related to the implementation of the described grotesque beyond reality, because only there – in the world of deeply rooted laughter, did this way of speaking find its *raison d'être*. It was characterized especially by “a relatively large number of curses, that is, offensive words and whole phrases, sometimes quite long and complex.”³⁶ In origin, they came from the verbal insults of the deities of the old cults, although during the carnival they took on a completely different dimension – folk praxis. Uprooted from the source context, they were defined in terms of by autotelicity, universality, and depth, which made them gain a completely new sense.³⁷ According to Jacques Heers, finding an arch-fool was sometimes a pretext for the beginning of an unexpected carnival, because “his every appearance in the city immediately arouses such cheap, common and distasteful enjoyment, and his path becomes a grotesque escape and a clown pursuit accompanied by all mockery and all kinds of violence. And all among the spontaneous outbursts of great merriment.”³⁸ The essence of the carnival to a particular extent was that under each beaten and insulted one, its creators perceive at the same time “a king, or a former king, or a pretender for a king.” This means that in the grotesque realism there is no division into better and worse, as there is utopian, universal equality there, if only because every symbolic death bears fruit simultaneously with birth.

The perverse nature of the carnival is equally clearly exemplified by Bakhtin, referring to the novel entitled *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais. He cites a rhetorical trick consisting in listing fifteen synonyms of faeces – from profanity to scholars; then it is loftily called “Hibernian saffron,” and the whole tirade is crowned with a call to drink, which in the author’s language means the assimilation of the truth.”³⁹ Let us note that all insults, therefore, have a tinge of praise and insult, which is related to their ambiguous nature oscillating on the one hand around enthronement in the act of ephemeral reign, while on the other hand, it is connected with ridicule together – because it thus shows the symptom of carnival ambivalence. The outlined logic of ambivalence finds its key materialization in the form of a mask motif. The mask is inextricably linked with the traits of transformation. The image of a person hidden beneath it takes on a completely new shade – a mood of mystery, so significant of the ambiguous connotation of laughter. In this light, it aims to transform the natural face of a given person into an image of a completely different colour. Hence, as Bakhtin declares, “it is associated with the joy of changes and transubstantiation, with cheerful relativity, with the cheerful rejection of identity and unambiguity, with the rejection of passive identity.”⁴⁰ Remaining unofficial by definition, it “signals a loss of individuality

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 76.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 77.

³⁸ J. Heers, *Święta głupców...*, p. 110.

³⁹ M. Bakhtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais'go...*, p. 271.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 103.

and assumes anonymity and, consequently, a multiplicity of identity.”⁴¹ Through its essential relativism, the mask deconstructs the seriousness contained in the concealed image of its official identity. Thus it is a priori variable, as it distorts the constancy of form, thus trying to break out of what is individual; “It is associated with transitions, metamorphoses, with the violation of natural boundaries, with mockery, with a nickname (replacing the name).”⁴² Let us recall that in the Middle Ages the institution of the church condemned the figure of the mask due to the fact that it was seen as “a prop of ritual magic dances and the pagan transformation of man into a sorcerer.”⁴³ Most often, masks were identified with the embodiment of the devil, as well as with other fantasy characters, which directly excluded them from use in official worship. Meanwhile, artists wearing masks faced the fate of ex-communication without trial. That is why the carnival participant, as the actor in the drama, was “elevated for the audience above the everyday world, he feels enthusiasm thanks to the mask he wears, alienated in the name of “I,” which he no longer presents, but which he realizes and makes it real.”⁴⁴ In this case, it can be assumed that the mask places its host on the border of two worlds, as, on the one hand, it belongs to the sphere of art, while, on the other hand, to the sphere of life.⁴⁵ As a result, a carnival participant is suspended in the utopian world of universality and the lack of an identifiable identity, where there is no division into performers and spectators. Contrary to the theatre, it is impossible to observe the carnival from the viewer’s perspective, since the world of grotesque realism is devoid of a “theatre ramp.”⁴⁶ In the situation when we are immersed in it, it remains to submit to its current, taking into consideration that no other reality exists outside of it.

In the light of these observations, I would like to develop the previously mentioned fundamental theme of carnival dance, often associated with fun, as well as with laughter. Thus, he inevitably became involved in the tradition of carnival intimacy. I will even say otherwise – without it, there would be no march and the impression of mutual equality of people walking in one column and with one goal. It is hard not to mention the advantages of this procession, where: “the scenes prepared on the carts, decorations, costumes and masks often brought to life characters who expressed this very desire to break the prohibitions,” “to the most varied extravagances, to the greatest frolics.”⁴⁷ In the above passage, particular attention should

⁴¹ J. Lechte, *Panorama współczesnej myśli humanistycznej*, Wydawnictwo „Książka i Wiedza”, Warszawa 1999, p. 26.

⁴² M. Bachtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais’go...*, p. 103.

⁴³ A. Banach, *Wybór maski. Jedenaście teatrów klasycznych*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków–Wrocław 1984, p. 69.

⁴⁴ M. Bachtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais’go...*, p. 195.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ Bachtin uses the metaphor of the “theater ramp” as a barrier sanctioning the division of people according to their social status. See M. Bachtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais’go...*, p. 64.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 170.

be paid to the logic of the reverse, within which interpersonal relations, unlike the serious world, retain a laudatory and offensive character.⁴⁸ In the carnival dance, every invective shimmered as praise, and the ridiculed fool turned into a king. Following in the common procession, having put on the mask, it was impossible not to feel the feeling of universal unity and openness emanating from everywhere, even from a jester who was making fun of you. Let us also note an interesting detail in the dance procession. Although it was adhered to in parody poetics, it in a way broke away from the logic of the “world turned upside down.” It is, as Heers paraphrased: “The Wheel of Fortune – reminds us of the human condition in the face of God and destiny, but also in a veiled, misty way; it is rather to illustrate the futility of ambition and the uncertainty of social position.”⁴⁹ In the convention, fortune is governed by a different logic, subordinated only to an uncertain fate, but to which we are all doomed regardless of our place in the social hierarchy and our skills, as in every game – as Roger Caillois reminds us – there is always a place for chance. In the light of these observations, it is worth remembering that the carnival belongs to the category of a periodic secular holiday, deeply rooted in the folk culture because it is specified by liveliness and familiarity. Secondly, it is a form of utopian reality in which there is universal equality between people. It should be emphasized here that it responds to the ossification of the social order, proposing to tarnish the established social hierarchy associated with the reversal of interpersonal dependence. Carnival realism claims the right to break the network of interpersonal constraints.

Therefore, allow me to conclude this overview by mentioning that the aesthetics, of the carnival defines a way of perceiving the world focused on the logic of the reverse, in which degradation, parody, the travesty is the main factor, and the clown instead of being humiliated becomes a king. The carnival feast is also about the ambivalence of phenomena, as it reduces their essence to emphasizing the colour of their ambiguity. Overall, one could say that the carnival festival is a source of bottom-up logic and metamorphosis. Its “masked” inversive nature is a pretext to open up to people, and the questioned identity takes on new meanings. One may stress that the features features of the carnival are united by laughter in general, as it it penetrates each of these spheres separately, it brings out from the carnival a particularly folk element of fun, aimed at reversing the hierarchy of values. That is why Aristotle aptly wrote, not without reason, that “of all beings only man can laugh.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 164.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, pp. 171–172.

⁵⁰ M. Bachtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais’go...*, p. 139.

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