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Carnival, Carnivalism and Bakhtin's Culture of Laughter

Bakhtin's concepts of carnival and the associated notions of carnivalization and the culture of laughter (*smekhovaia kul'tura*) are rooted in his philosophical thinking of the 1920s and 1930s, in particular his search for a new anthropological relationship between human bodies and minds that establishes the image of the acting human being in the "image of the world, constituted by his act" (Sandler 2017, 20). He principally developed them in two books, the first written as two versions in the late 1930s and early 1940s and the second in the first half of the 1960s. With its title *Francoise Rabelais in the History of Realism*, the first book stresses carnival's significance for the question of realism, which was the subject of debate after the presentation of Socialist Realism as the oblique aesthetic norm in Soviet Russia from 1934 on. Carnival enriches the concept of realism with the incompatible, the unlimited and the unfinishable. The second book, entitled *The Work of Francoise Rabelais and the People's Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, discusses the impact of European folklore and its history on Rabelais' prose. In so doing, it counteracts the restricted concept of the simplified 'popular' in Soviet culture. The notion of grotesque/gothic realism (*grotesknyi/goticheskii realizm*, Bakhtin 2008a, 23–33) fundamental to the first version and its cultural context is later replaced by the concept of the people's culture of laughter/feasts (*smekhovaia/prazdnichnaia narodnaia kul'tura*, Bakhtin 2010, 11–21; cf. Popova 2009, 143–144), derived from the German term *Lachkultur* (not "Lachenkultur", as erroneously claimed in the commentary, Popova 2010, 588). The notion of carnivalization is also a product of the later versions of Bakhtin's books on Rabelais and Dostoevskii (Bakhtin 2010, 419; 2002a, 122). It paved the way for its boundless application of the concept of carnival in Western, often sociological, research on literature and culture, fine art and cinema.

Bakhtin had already traced the folkloristic basis of carnival in the eighth chapter of his work *The Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel* (2012d [1975], 399–471), written in 1937–1939 in the context of his research on the theory of the novel, but the study could not be published until 1975 (and then only after a reworking). He sees the aim of the new Rabelaisian chronotope in the (re)creation of "a new, harmonic, integral human being" (*novogo garmonicheskogo tsel'nogo cheloveka*, Bakhtin 2012d, 420) as a figure in the novelistic art of "realistic phantasm" (*realisticheskaia fantastika*, Bakhtin 2012d, 420) that restores an always very concrete space in the horizon of the endlessly repeating folkloristic time of rebirth and reincarnation. The notion of realistic phantasm possibly goes back to

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and opposes the "phantastic realism" (*phantastischer Realismus*) Nietzsche (1980, 7, 32) applied to Shakespeare's tragedies.

Bakhtin first laid down his concept of carnival around 1937–1938 in his – probably uncompleted – work on Goethe's Bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795/96, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) (Popova 2010, 611–615) in relation to Goethe's essay "Das römische Carneval" (1789, "The Roman Carnival"; Bakhtin 2008a, 241–251; 2010, 262–275; cf. Nährlich-Slatewa 1989). It is connected to the reception of Georges Lote's (1938) monograph on the life and letters of Rabelais and Christian Rang's article "Historical Psychology of Carnival" (1927–1928, cf. Grübel 1979, 57; Popova 2009, 141; 2010, 555). It consists of five elements: 1) a non-external vision of the body (which coincides with the people and the cosmos), 2) performance without a stage and without an audience, 3) familiarization (the destruction of distances), 4) misalliance (the violation of the social hierarchy), and 5) profanation (the desecration of holy texts and positions). Its epistemological drive is the rejection of abstraction in favor of the concrete single phenomenon, the individual human being – hence the relevance of enumerations and a human collective in Rabelais' novel "in which everybody can be called by his name" (Bakhtin 2008b, 646). The integration of the single body in the collective body of the people goes along with an externalization of the I, which for Bakhtin began in ancient Greek culture: "But this integral outwardness of the human being was not carried out in an empty space [...] but in an organic human collective, 'to the people'" (Bakhtin 2012d, 389). The origin of Bakhtin's concept of the collective body of the people, an important component of which is orthodox synodality (*sobornost'*, Bakhtin 1996d, 114), has yet to be convincingly reconstructed. Bakhtin's concern with Franciscan Catholicism (which he shared with his friend the musician Marina Iudina) is also relevant, but the most important element is the Romantic tradition (going back to Herder; Bakhtin 2012b, 202, 206; 2012c, 249–250; cf. Pypin 1890) of the people as a stereotypical collective symbol which is incorporated in the language and the literature of a nation and which became a political ('populists') argument. Not without good reason, this tradition has recently been criticized by Il'ja Kukulin as 'conservative' (Kukulin et al. 2020). We suppose that Goethe's statement in his talks with Eckermann played a role in the formation of Bakhtin's notion of the collective: "There are no individuals ... This individual or the one you want is representative of the entire species. Basically [...] we are all collective beings, we may pose however we wish" (Eckermann 1986, 691). In his scientific context, Bakhtin used the concepts of culture advanced by Simmel (Davydov 1997; Sasse 2013), Cassirer (Eilenberger 2009) and Freidenberg (Scílard 1985).

Rabelais' novel *Gangantua and Pantragruel*, which Bakhtin had criticized in *Slovo v romane* (*The Word in the Novel*, written in the first half of the 1930s, first

published in 1965; Bakhtin 2012a, 62–65) for the author's (i. e. the narrator's) parodistic rejection of language and its consequence, the absence of truth in language and the complete governance of the lie, is now reinterpreted as the presentation of the people's laughter with its truth against any official seriousness (which is always founded on lies). The extent to which this radical change was caused by the horror of Stalin's Great Purge (*Bol'shoi terror*) of 1937–1938 – which in the Moscow show trials presented overtly transparent lies as truth – and reacts to it as the presentation of gluttony, probably due to the famine years, the result of forced collectivization, is still a matter of debate (Hull 2018; Sasse 2010, 157–158). At any rate, Bakhtin himself always stressed the importance of the concrete context of phenomena and words in the reconstruction of their meaning and sense (Morson and Emerson 1990, 58). This becomes obvious when Bakhtin (1996a, 50) hints at the "unofficial" character of laughter and shapes it as an "inner form" (*vnutrenniaia forma*) which is bound to its own truth, "liberating from outer and inner censorship, from fear of authoritarian interdiction, of the past and of power" (Bakhtin 2012a, 106). While many researchers see Bakhtin's carnival as a response to totalitarian Stalinism (Lachmann 1990; Gjunter 2000), some scholars have interpreted Bakhtin's model of carnival as a legitimation of Stalin's terrorism (Grois 1997), which fits with the phantasmic accusation (alternative facts) that for many years Bakhtin worked for the KGB (see my chapter on Bakhtin's philosophy of literature and its interrelation with literary theory and culture in this volume).

In his later years, Bakhtin stressed his view of carnivalization as the translation of carnival from actual behavior into its representation in literature and art as a core component of the culture of laughter. In opposition to its serious counterpart, this culture points out not unambiguous meaning and univalence, but the ambiguity and ambivalence of acts and spoken words. It is bound to the people's culture, which Renate Lachmann (1987, 8–10) has called a "counter-culture" (*Gegenkultur*). While in the Russian context, the reception of Bakhtin's concept of carnival was, in most cases, very positive until the Orthodox church regained strength (cf. Likhachev and Panchenko 1984) or positive and critical (cf. Gurevich 2004, 53, 108), we notice during recent years growing disapproval, following Averintsev's (1988, 1993) insistence on the religious negation of laughter (Karavkin 2016), above all in Orthodox Christian belief, which in this regard differs from Western culture. Contrary to this supposed opposition, the Russian ethnologist Vladimir Propp (1963) already recognized two years before the appearance of Bakhtin's book the correspondence of Russian and European agrarian feasts with ancient traditions. However, Viktor Shklovskii (1970, 273) and many after him, criticized Bakhtin's unhistorical treatment of mediaeval carnival, underestimating the latter's philosophical and anthropological aim. Bakhtin's words 'carnival', 'carnivalization', and 'world of laughter' are also ingredients of philosophical

anthropology and the philosophy of literature, cultural theory and ethnology (cf. Sandler 2017), which severely hinders any traditional methodological approach. As early as 1804, Jean Paul (1990, 102) remarked that the ridiculous has never been compatible with the definitions of philosophers.

The notable fact that Bakhtin avoids thematizing the carnival as an act in Russian culture can be seen as a consequence of the Soviet ban on its main manifestation, the Butter Week (*maslenitsa*), in the late 1920s, a ban that was only lifted in the 1970s. In the early 1960s, when Bakhtin reworked his book on Rabelais, the Communist Party tried to replace the 'backward' and 'obsolete' Butter Week with the 'progressive' Soviet socialist feast 'Farewell to Winter' (*Provody zimy*, cf. Radchenko 2016, 266, 169). It is also striking that in Russia, Bakhtin's book(s) on Rabelais is/are debated much more critically than the two versions of his Dostoevskii book. While the first Moscow edition of 1965 was limited to 6,000 copies (reprinted in Düsseldorf in 1986), the second edition, appearing only 25 years later, in 1990, enjoyed a much higher circulation, almost tenfold with 50,000 copies. This is probably due not only to the questionable presence of the carnival in the East Slavic culture of the Middle Ages (now present in Russia, cf. Averintsev 1992) but also to the position and role of the concept of Menippian satire ('*menippova satira*', '*menippeia*') developed in the second edition of the Dostoevskii book, a concept which received much more discussion in German during the 1930s and 1940s (on Menippian satire, see also Frye 1944–1955, 1957) than in Russian classical studies (Popova 2010, 564–584). But it is also due to the general critical evaluation of the culture of laughter in dogmatic Orthodox religion. In his books on Rabelais (1965) and Dostoevskii (second version in 1963) Bakhtin combined the quality of the carnivalesque not only with the cultural traditions of Menippian satire but also with the soliloquy and the diatribe on the one hand and a universal culture of laughter (*smekhovaia kul'tura*, Bakhtin 2010, 13–27) on the other. The former is not so much the philological reconstruction of a special satirical tradition of presenting a broken relationship with the narrated world (the Old Greek satires of Menipp have not been preserved) as an account of a double-voiced telling, which in some fragmentary texts by Bakhtin (1996c, 75) is traced back to the dialogue of the human being, for instance Job, with God, but is also found in Dostoevskii's term "fantastic storytelling" (*fantasticheskii rasskaz*, Bakhtin 2002b, 361).

In the context of the mytho-poetics of Modernism, Bakhtin conceived the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance as strongly fed by pagan, partially religiously reshaped, mythical motifs, following Burckhardt's concept of the Renaissance's break with the medieval period (*Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien: ein Versuch*, 1860, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*), which, drawing on Greek and Roman classical cultures, sustained Neoclassicism and Huizinga's

response in his book *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (1919, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 1997), which stressed the finality of the Middle Ages with their archaic motif of revenge and the decline of chivalry in favor of an implicit Romanticism. Because Bakhtin's concept of the carnival itself concerns a recurring event of collective human life which comes from the mysteries of mythical culture and carnivalism (especially in literature) is only its expression in artistic culture, and because in his conception authentic carnival events, still present in the Middle Ages, were increasingly translated into artistic culture from the Renaissance onwards, his notion of carnivalism has a melancholic touch that has often been overlooked: he is also reporting a cultural loss. For Bakhtin, the crisis of modern culture consists in the increasing forfeiture of this unofficial, birth-giving, never-ending dialogical laugh culture, the alternative to the stable, serious, death- and end-orientated monologic official culture. Hence he criticizes Lefranc (1953) for remaining within the official culture in his interpretation of Rabelais.

In Bakhtin's thinking, the concept of the carnival is deeply correlated with the ideas of *dialogue* (Elliot 1999) and *polyphony* (Kohler 2004). The human body imbued with the "people's immortality" (*bessmerti[e] naroda*, Bakhtin 2008a, 322) correlates with the endlessness of the word in the dialogue. Just as dialogue negates the singularity of the voice of a spoken word, carnival negates the singularity of the individual person in the world. Every unique single person is potentially integrated into the union of its people and negates the "completely finished, finalized, strictly delineated, enclosed, externally shown, unmixed and expressive body" (Bakhtin 2008a, 317). Due to its cosmic dimension, the carnival body is materialized in the special chronotope of "the body in the air" (*telo v vozdukhe*, Popova 2010, 562), which is also the chronotope of "permanent becoming" (Makhlin 2001, 339).

As most Western readers of the Rabelais book did not perceive its philosophical and anthropological implications, they took it primarily as an historical and/or sociological analysis of European Renaissance culture. For instance, in Germany there arose a dispute between Moser (1986, 1990) and Schindler (1984a, 1984b, 1992) in which the former declared the carnival to have been merely a religious feast with a moral-didactic function, whereas the latter followed Bakhtin in relating it back to pagan festivities. Umberto Eco (1984) preferred the comic to laughter and foregrounded the ludic and noncommittal character of the carnival, which legitimizes parricide but ultimately confirms the official rule. In his eyes, laughter is mostly used as a social sanction for deviation from the norm. Postmodernists such as Hutcheon found fault with Bakhtin's blind spot in relation to the repression and (official) institutionalization of the carnival. Like Peter Burke (1978, 201–202), Allon White and Peter Stalybrass (1986) reduced the carnival to a rest break, allowed by rulers in order to cement the 'normal' violent relationships.

Later, Peter Burke (2000) joined others in criticizing Bakhtin's vague delimitation of the notion of 'people's culture' from (official) 'learned culture' with regard to Rabelais. Jacques Le Goff (1989) agrees with Freud, Bergson, and Bataille, arguing that laughing is a social act with three institutions: the laughing person, the person about whom people laugh and the person towards whom the laughter is directed. Differing with Bakhtin, he reports that in the course of the Middle Ages laughing came under the control of the church and the throne. In the first period (sixth to tenth centuries), it was largely suppressed, because Jesus Christ did not laugh; later, it became increasingly controlled. Although Le Goff welcomed Bakhtin's notion of the culture of laughter, he expressed doubts about the latter's thesis that the Renaissance freed laughter from the control of the church. However, the majority of Western literary critics, not specialists in medieval culture, followed Bakhtin's proclamation of the carnival as an alternative culture, which implies revolutionary potential. Like many others, Michael Gardiner (2002), who took Bakhtin's entire work as a new sociology, interpreted his concept of the carnival as a 'utopian critique' of existing societies (Gardiner 1992). Schümer (2002, 853), on the other hand, complains about Bakhtin's "fundamental ignorance of his subject: carnival". Nevertheless, the Classical philologists Carrière (1979) and Möllendorff (1995) used Bakhtin's model of laughter for their research on the ancient Greek comedies.

The process of Bakhtin's defense of his book on Rabelais as a dissertation at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow (proposed by A. Smirnov) with its Lenin quotations – which were demanded and later deleted – lasted from 1946 to 1952 and had very grotesque carnivalesque traits reconstructed and documented by Sasse (2015). Sasse has also shown how dissident artists in Prague (1975) and Moscow (1991–2006) have used Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization as an argument supporting the demand that art should be free.

In the West, the publication of the translations of the Rabelais book (the first appeared in the USA in 1968) coincided with the students' revolution and stimulated an anti-capitalistic political understanding of Bakhtin's carnival. In fact, Bakhtin's concept introduced a new philosophical outlook on laughter: "Laughter for the first time opens the present, as a subject of representation" (Bakhtin 2008c, 681). Objections are raised from an Orthodox perspective both to Bakhtin's idea of freedom by laughter and to his concept of the (collective) immortality of the people (Shchepenko 2009).

A lasting provocation for Christian religion and its theology is Bakhtin's understanding of the Gospel as a product of carnivalization (Bakhtin 2002a, 151–152). (Orthodox scholars especially criticize the fact that Bakhtin celebrates purgatory with laughter.) Not only does Bakhtin consider the Old Testament as the law and the New Testament as a counter-text, but he regards the appear-

ances and performances of Jesus Christ as carnival acts. In this understanding, Kafka's famous miniature "Before the Law" (1915) is a thoroughly carnivalesque text which stresses not the past and not the future, but the present. A very promising approach for world literature is the application of Bakhtin's concept to cultures outside of the European context (cf. Gates 1988, 50, 110 with regard to double-voiced talk; cf. also Bakhtin's own appeal to Buddhism, Bakhtin 1996d, 115). Just as Sandler (2017, 17) sees Bakhtin remodel his philosophical thinking with the carnival in the field of aesthetics with the notion of "the vision of a free and creating person", we can consider Bakhtin's carnival as a late modern case of the art of religion (Grübel 2013), which is a reply to Solov'ev's and Rozanov's religion of art. Although Aaron Gurevich welcomed Bakhtin's concept of the carnival as a stimulating idea, he also qualified it as a 'scientific myth' (*nauchnyi mif*). Most probably, it is the mental creation of an unsuppressed body (cf. Abramova et al. 1996, 10–13).

We meet Bakhtinian carnivalization in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("The time is out of joint", Shakespeare 1984, 950), in Heine's *Börne* (1952, 96; "inverted order of the world", cf. Bakhtin 2002a, 166; 2002b, 346) and in Kharms' proclamation: "One human being thinks logically, many people think 'fluently'" (Kharms 2000, 285). Bakhtin himself saw it, besides in Rabelais, in Poe (Bakhtin 2002b, 346), Gogol', Dostoevskii, Proust (Bakhtin 1996e, 134) and Kafka (Bakhtin 2002d, 461), in Khlebnikov (Bakhtin 2002e, 140–141) and Maiakovskii (Bakhtin 1996a, 52–62; 1996b, 63–67; 2002c, 414), in Joyce (Bakhtin 1996e, 134) and Surrealism (Bakhtin 1996d, 119; Bakhtin 2002e, 50), and in Vaginov (Bakhtin 2002e, 212–213) and Camus (Bakhtin 2002c, 382; Bocharov 2002, 471).

When Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*) labeled the human being a social being that is able to laugh, he condemned laughter as an 'affect of superiority' (as did Hobbes). Nevertheless, he conceded the possibility of laughter coinciding with tears. Bataille (1976, 93), who considered himself a "philosopher of laughter", understood laughter as a phenomenon of non-understanding, surprise and expenditure, contrary to knowledge, logical reason and economy. While he regarded laughter as connected to dying, Bakhtin connected it with immortality. Unlike Bergson, both found in laughter an opportunity to come into immediate contact with other people. Unlike Bataille, and unlike Plessner (1941), Bakhtin separated laughing from weeping in order to sustain the culture of laughter as a possible defense against an overwhelming power. And he has divided laughter from the horrible, which is present, for instance, in the laughing and destroying goddess Maya (Zimmer 1946, 191).

Ultimately, the frequently noted strict opposition of Bakhtin's carnival as an ethical act with its own truth to the truth of epistemological reflection is relativized by Hegel's anticipation of Nietzsche's Dionysm grounding truth in drunken-

ness and dissolving the single individual into general calmness: "The true is thus the Bacchanalian revel, in which no member is not drunk, and, since each, separating himself, also dissolves [himself] immediately, it is also transparent and simple tranquility" (Hegel 1952, 39). It is even more relativized by the confession of Schlegel's narrator in the Romantic novel *Lucinde*, which compresses laughter and tears: "I think of how in our final embrace I burst into tears and laughter at once in the surge of heavy contradictions" (Schlegel 1799, 26). Life implies comic laughter and serious sadness. But, as Bakhtin has shown, without the former it is less than half a life.

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