

Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture

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# Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture

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*Renate Lachmann*

*Wozu dient Zergliedern gewesenen Lachens*

What is the use of dissecting past laughter?

—Florens Christian Rang, *Historische Psychologie des Karnevals*<sup>1</sup>

## I

When Mikhail Bakhtin characterized his Rabelais study as “the first step in a grand enterprise of studying folk culture of laughter,” he was, properly speaking, formulating two mutually intertwined goals.<sup>2</sup> The first was to set forth a new interpretation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* that would cut away the dross of moralizing-officializing, puritanical-puristic “misreadings” and that would once more lay

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1. Florens Christian Rang, *Historische Psychologie des Karnevals*, ed. Ludwig Jäger (Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 1983). Further references appear in the text as *Historische Psychologie*.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Further references appear in the text as *Rabelais*.

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open Rabelais's work within the cultural and semantic context of the Renaissance, that unique epoch in which "folk culture and high culture converge." The second goal was to reconstruct this folk culture in its verbal, gestural, and ritual manifestations through an analysis of Rabelais's novel.

How are we to understand Bakhtin's attitude towards the Renaissance culture of laughter and towards its literary representatives—the attitude of an amputee suffering from an incurable bone disease towards the apotheosis of the body, the attitude of a witness of the Stalinist "purges" towards the propagation of cultural contamination, anti-dogmatism, and the transgression of boundaries and norms?<sup>3</sup>

Banished from the center of official Soviet culture because of his involvement in an unofficial circle of philosophers,<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin recognized from his marginal perspective in society the emancipatory power of that which pulls away from the center, the multiplicity of split-offs from the core. Even before his banishment, as he began to grasp the threatening ossification of the Soviet system, Bakhtin had developed the notion of a cultural mechanism determined by the conflict between two forces, the centrifugal and the centripetal. It is precisely the latter that tends towards the univocalization and closure of a system, towards the monological, towards monopolizing the hegemonic space of *the* single truth. This centripetal force permeates the entire system of language and forces it towards unification and standardization; it purges literary language of all traces of dialect and substandard linguistic elements and allows only one idiom to exist. The centripetal force is countered by a centrifugal one aimed at promoting ambivalence and allowing openness and transgression.

Bakhtin had firsthand experience of the cultural paradigms that these mechanisms brought forth. He lived through the revolutionary euphoria of the 1920s, participated in a text practice and culture that not

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3. See, for example, Rainer Grübel, "Michail Bachtin. Biographische Skizze," in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Ästhetik des Wortes*, ed. Rainer Grübel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979); Tzvetan Todorov, "Biography," in Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

4. For a more detailed account of Bakhtin's exile to Saransk, the capital of the non-Russian Mordvinian Soviet Republic, see P. Anciferov, "Tri glavy iz vospominanij," *Pamjat'* 4 (1981): 55-152 and 280.

only preached, but also practiced openness, hybridization, and dehierarchization. At the same time, he was witness to the process of increasing closure, isolation, and hierarchization taking place in Soviet society. For Bakhtin, however, it was precisely the experience of revolution, the swirling up of meaning that it brought forth, the experience of the plurality of worlds, of the intercrossing of cultures and languages, of texts, and genres—in other words, the experience of the postrevolutionary avant-garde in Russia—that determined his approach to Rabelais. Bakhtin interpreted Rabelais as the representative of an upheaval in which he recognized his own time. The relationship between Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* is thus not only that of a text about a text, that is, of an interpretive text about a literary text, but also the expression of a basic affinity. Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist, authors of a recently published book on Bakhtin, have aptly formulated this point:

Each [Bakhtin and Rabelais] springs from an age of revolution, and each enacts a particularly open sense of the text. Bakhtin can hear Rabelais' laughter because he knows how to read Rabelais' book, and he demonstrates this capability in the act of writing his own book.

And:

Bakhtin has written a book about another book that constantly plays with the categories and transgresses the limits of official ideology. Like Rabelais, Bakhtin throughout his book is exploring the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial.<sup>5</sup>

In the counter-ideology of his Rabelais study, Bakhtin analyzes the disruption of this central experience of ambivalence. This disruption occurs through the establishment of a new postrevolutionary hierarchy that follows upon the dehierarchization brought about by the revolutionary period, through the enshrinement of the heroic and the monumental, and through the rigid separation of high and low, of sacral person (Stalin), sacral place (the Kremlin), and sacral time (the epiphany

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5. Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 297.

of the super-hero) from the profane realm of Soviet daily life. When read in this fashion, the carnival laughter whose forms and function Bakhtin defines applies not only to the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire of the Renaissance, but also to Stalinism, the new “sublime” realm of a remote, imperious ruler.

Neither at the close of the 1920s nor during the ‘30s and ‘40s were compromises between Bakhtin’s ideas and official Soviet ideology possible. Bakhtin’s concept of carnival laughter can be read as a subversive attack on the perverted concept of folk culture that prevailed in the Stalin era, a culture that was decreed from on high and that in reality offered no alternative to the official one. In laughter as celebrated by Renaissance folk culture in the carnival, namely as a spectacular feast of inversion and parody of high culture, Bakhtin sees the possibility of a “complete withdrawal from the present order” (*Rabelais*, 275). In other words, in the carnivalesque game of inverting official values he sees the anticipation of another, utopian world in which anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway, a world in which syncretism and a myriad of differing perspectives are permitted.

The “prevailing order” of Bakhtin’s day was, however, that of a folk culture from which the folk had been banished and replaced by its perverse double: “folklore.” The poetics of the folk epos became a recommended literary paradigm; carnival laughter was stifled in the chorus. The spontaneous, open-air folk dance became a stage(d) show, the marketplace an opera house. Degrees of transgression were bound by perfectly applied choreographic rules. The “staged” folk was reduced to a “sublime” decoration that repressed the blasphemous, the parodistic, and the obscene and that had no place for the body’s carnality and corporeality. Bakhtin’s apotheosis of the body as grotesque had its negative pendant in the “exaltation” of the functional body, as exemplified by the drive to overfulfill quotas, by the Stakhanov movement, or by the disembodied folk body as heroicized in public monuments. Outfitted in folk dress, uniform, or work clothes, the functional body was secured against every sort of contamination: firmly entrenched in institutional hierarchies or the work brigade, it was separated from other bodies through competition and robbed of all sexual distinctions. In official Soviet culture, this ascetic body striving for higher ideals could be parodied only in one image: that of the inebriated citizen sobering up in the local

drunk tank. Contamination, as the “despoiling” of one realm by another, was “cleaned up” in the Stalinist purges, to which language, literature, ideology, and the body (whether individual or collective) were subjugated. Under the banner of crude “naturalism” or “physiologism,” official censorship cut short all attempts to represent the corporeal and the sexual; the word of the censor silenced authors like Pil’njak and Babel’. Bakhtin countered the official image of the body developed by Socialist Realism with his concept of “grotesque realism,” which he introduced in his description of Rabelais’s corporeal poetics and which also applies to a part of the avant-garde literature of the 1920s.

The theory of carnival culture and carnivalized literature already expounded by Bakhtin in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1928)<sup>6</sup> is combined in the Rabelais study with the concept of folk culture as unofficial culture. The connection between the two studies becomes evident in one of his main theses, namely that Rabelais and Dostoevsky belong in a common genre tradition having its beginnings in the Menippean Satire, a tradition which in its thematics, stylistics, and narrative structure represents a counter-tradition to the “epic” (classical) line of European prose. About the specific interdependencies and relations between genre tradition, folk culture, and “carnival ideology” more will be said further on.

Whereas the Rabelais studies available to Bakhtin in the 1930s appeared to represent precisely that reductionistic approach which ignored the “universal” principle of laughter in Rabelais’s work and the status of laughter in carnival culture, Bakhtin was able to recur to Russian studies of Rabelais which from today’s perspective can be viewed as anticipations of a number of his central theses.<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin also discovered

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6. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Further references appear in the text as *Dostoevsky*. The first version appeared under the title *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo* (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Work) (Leningrad: Priboj, 1929); the second, revised and expanded, under the title *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics) (Moscow: Sovetskij pisatel’, 1963).

The expanded version of Bakhtin’s monograph *Fransua Rable v istorii realizma* (François Rabelais in the History of Realism) appeared under the title *Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul’tura srednevekov’ja i Renessansa* (François Rabelais and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance) (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaja literatura, 1965). For a bibliography of Bakhtin’s work, see Clark and Holquist’s summary, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 354-56.

7. See, for example, the following studies: Leonid Efimovich Pinskij, *Realizm epoxi*

congenial ideas in K.E. Flögel's *Geschichte des Grotesk-Komischen*.<sup>8</sup> In particular, Flögel's description of the phenomenon of laughter appeared to confirm Bakhtin's own assumptions. Bakhtin's study—which he initially entitled “François Rabelais in the History of Realism”—was presented as a dissertation at the Institute of World Literature of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, where it was heavily criticized; only after the tremendous success of the revised version of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky book, which appeared in 1963, could “François Rabelais” finally be published in 1965. In the twenty-five year period between his dissertation defense and the publication of the book, Bakhtin worked into his introduction a critique of one of the most important publications on his theme, Wolfgang Kayser's *Das Grotteske*.<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin rejected Kayser's position as being limited to the Romantic variant of grotesque horror, which he criticized for excluding the liberating aspect of laughter and for overlooking its universal dimension. More recent literature on Renaissance culture or Rabelais was either unknown or inaccessible to him.

Within the Soviet Union, *Rabelais and His World* quickly became a scholarly *cause célèbre*, just as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* had two years earlier. Bakhtin became a kind of scholarly cult figure, with two divergent directions in Soviet scholarship claiming his work for their own. Conformist cultural ideology and literary scholarship adopted both Bakhtin's opposition of official and unofficial culture (which it interpreted as describing class conflict) and his critique of Formalism. By contrast, the Tartu-Moscow school of textual and cultural semiotics—which in the Soviet context protrudes into the realm of the unofficial—treated his

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*vozhrozhdenija* (The Realism of the Renaissance) (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaja literatura, 1961)—Bakhtin recurs here in particular to the chapter “Smex Rable” (Rabelais's Laughter); Ol'ga M. Frejdenberg, *Poetika Sjuzheta i zhanra: period antichnoj literatury* (The Poetics of Subject and Genre: The Period of Ancient Literature) (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaja literatura, 1936); Elena Markovna Evnina, *Fransua Rable* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaja literatura, 1948). Bakhtin commends the Rabelais translation of Nikolai Matveevich Ljubimov (1961), the first complete Russian translation. Bakhtin was apparently not aware of Leo Spitzer's article “Rabelais et les ‘rabelaisants’,” *Studi Francesi* 12 (September–December 1960): 401–23.

8. Karl Friedrich Flögel, *Geschichte des Grotesk-Komischen*, revised by Friedrich W. Ebeling (Leipzig: H. Barsdorf, 1887).

9. Wolfgang Kayser, *Das Grotteske, Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1957) (trans. by Ulrich Weisstein as *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963]). Bakhtin also discussed Beda Alleman's *Ironie und Dichtung* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1956), which he criticized for separating the phenomenon of irony from the culture of laughter.

concepts of the sign as an anticipation of its own theories, attempted to formulate more precise definitions of his descriptive system, and discussed Bakhtin as a theoretician of culture in the context of Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology and Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>10</sup> These diverging lines of interpretation converge in a certain sense in Likhachev and Panchenko's *The Laugh World of Ancient Russia*,<sup>11</sup> a monograph which attempted to set forth a new approach to the cultural history of the Russian Middle Ages.

The history of Rabelais's reception, to which Bakhtin accords considerable space at the beginning of his study, is simultaneously the history of misreadings and the history of how the culture of laughter degenerates after reaching its zenith in the Renaissance—a process which is in turn the root cause of such misreadings. In other words, the misunderstanding of Rabelais's novel is the result of a waning carnivalesque consciousness that is expressed in the reduction of the carnival to innocuous revelry, in its puritanization, and in its usurpation by bourgeois culture.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Bakhtin rejects a reduction of carnival functions to a purely socially critical element.

The question arises as to Bakhtin's concrete knowledge of the culture of laughter. It is safe to assume that he was familiar both with the history of the Russian tradition of laughter (which is related to the Western European one) and with a number of its concrete manifestations. Bakhtin also "knew" the Roman carnival of the late eighteenth century, his source being Goethe's *Das Römische Karneval*. Bakhtin recurred to

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10. See in particular *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (Studies on Signs Systems) 6(1973), which was dedicated to Bakhtin on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, as well as the commemorative volume, *Problemy poetiki i istorii literatury: Sbornik Statei*, ed. S.S. Konkin, et al. (Saransk: Mordovskii Gos. Universitet Imeni N.P. Ogareva, 1973) published by his pupils and "rediscoverers," where Bakhtin taught for more than thirty years after his departure from Leningrad. For more on the reception of Bakhtin in West German scholarship see Wolfgang Preisendanz, "Karnevalisierung der Erzählfunktion in Balzac's 'Les Parents pauvres,'" in *Honoré de Balzac*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, Karlheinz Stierle, and Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1980), 391-410; Petra Herrmann, *Karnevaleske Strukturen in der Neidhart-Tradition* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1984), as well as the collection *Dialogizität*, ed. Renate Lachmann (Munich: Fink, 1982).

11. Dimitrii Sergeevich Likhachev and Aleksandr Mikhailovich Panchenko, *'Smexovoi mir' drevnej Rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976).

12. Rang contends that the "paralysis (*Erlahmen*) of the carnival" began as early as the middle ages (*Historische Psychologie*, 44). Rang, who conceived of the carnival as beginning in Chaldea, traced its influence on the immediately following cultures but had little interest in the periods subsequent to antiquity.



Goethe's carnival description, which fascinated him in many regards, even as he complained of its neglect of the "cosmic" dimension. His main source, however—and thus the reason for the dual project mentioned above—was Rabelais's novel.

Russia is without a doubt not the reference point of Bakhtin's study, yet the few allusions to Russian elements in Bakhtin's critique of Renaissance culture justify applying them to the Soviet Union. One such example is Bakhtin's allusion to how a despotic ruler—Ivan the Terrible—usurped carnival rituals for his own worldly ends. Ivan took the carnivalesque inversion of the world literally and applied it pragmatically. The carnivalesque ridiculing and profanation of the sacral (as embodied by the Russian Orthodox Patriarch) became reality under Ivan, just as did the crowning of a low-ranking vassal as Tsar and the Tsar's own real abdication. Within his own state, Ivan the Terrible established a counter-state that suspended the prevailing laws through its own set of counter-laws.

This is an inversion of the carnival usurpation of official culture: it is not the king of fools who usurps the real king, but rather the real king who usurps the fool, usurps the power that is unleashed when everything is turned upside down. The usurped carnival is directed against the folk, for the counter-law with its masquerade and mime is used to perpetuate a rule of violence: the carnival becomes a theater of cruelty.<sup>13</sup>

Bakhtin also names another case of carnival usurpation, which, however, took on quite a different form. This case was that of Peter the Great. Both Tsars—Ivan and Peter—were considered in the Stalin era to be prefigurations of the People's Leader, of Stalin himself.<sup>14</sup> When Bakhtin quotes at the end of his book from Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, a drama in which the folk "has the last word" by laughing at Boris, the usurper of legitimate power, his aim is to establish precisely this laughing folk as a historical force: "All the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people. . . . However,

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13. Sergej Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible* represented a coded (but for his contemporaries understandable) treatment of the Ivan/Stalin theme. Viacheslav Vserolodovich Ivanov has treated the influence of Bakhtin's carnival conception on Eisenstein's imagery in "Znachenie idej M.M. Bakhtina o znake, vyskazyvanii i dialoge dlja sovremennoj semiotiki" (The Meaning of Bakhtin's Ideas on the Sign, Utterance and Dialogue for Modern Semiotics), in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, 38ff. For more on the cruel laugh acts of Ivan the Terrible, see Likhachev and Panchenko, *'Smexovoj mir' drevnej Rusi*.

14. See Clark and Holquist's in-depth interpretation, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 306.

not every period of history had Rabelais for coryphaeus" (*Rabelais*, 474). In the last passage of *Rabelais*, Bakhtin himself suggests the validity of this novel for epochs beyond the Renaissance and thus also the broader validity of his own interpretation:

Though [Rabelais] led the popular chorus of only one time, the Renaissance, he so fully and clearly revealed the peculiar and difficult language of the laughing people that his work sheds its light on the folk culture of humor belonging to other ages. (*Rabelais*, 474)

In its understanding of war, life, death, power, and the future, the folk acts as super-individual transcending history and time. Against dogmatism and the reification of revolutionary deeds and ideals Bakhtin holds forth the idea of permanent revolution; against the positive "achievements" of the revolution—which are always its betrayal and perversion—he propounds the "negative" revolution that has not yet spoken out its "truth."<sup>15</sup>

## II

Any interpretation of Bakhtin's concept of folk culture as a culture of laughter must keep in mind its double motivation: on the one hand, as a world view and, on the other, as a typology of culture.

Folk culture appears periodically as a culture of laughter by means of an ensemble of rites and symbols, a temporarily existing life-form that enables the carnival to take place. By contrast, the principle of laughter that organizes the carnival is transtemporal and universal. Laughter rises above and transcends the objects at which it is temporarily aimed: official institutions and the sacral. It is a laughter that shakes the species-body of humanity, it is collective and directed at the "world whole":

Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and

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15. *Ibid.*, 317.

affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world. (*Dostoevsky*, 127)<sup>16</sup>

In laughter there occurs a “second revelation”; a “second truth” is proclaimed to the world.

Bakhtin does not allow the pathos of his world view to be reduced to the description of concrete forms of laughter and their historical functions. His approach thus has two objects of interest: the proclamation of the second birth of the world out of the spirit of laughter and the morphology of the extra-ordinary carnivalesque culture, which undermines the prevailing institutions of power through its symbols and rites of laughter.

The second truth about the world reveals it to be that place in which the “drama of the body” is played out, the drama of birth, coitus, death, growing, eating, drinking, and evacuation. This corporeal drama applies not to the private, individual body, but rather to the larger collective one of the folk.

The truth of the second revelation is the truth of the relativity of the truth, the truth of crisis and change, the truth of ambivalence.<sup>17</sup> In the act of carnival laughter, crisis manifests itself as negation and affirmation, as ridicule and triumph. The consciousness of transition and crisis which corresponds to the carnival period resists the single monologic solution and univocalization, the absoluteness of death. This is the crux of Bakhtin’s approach: he formulates a myth of ambivalence that denies the “end” by sublimating death in and through laughter. Thus by ridiculing death and finiteness, folk culture, which is the bearer of this revelation, embodies the refusal to acknowledge the authority of those official institutions which, by taking death and the end into their calculations, seek to exert and extend their hegemony. Only by denying official power and its hierarchical rigor through the enactment of militantly ludistic carnival rituals can folk culture successfully “stage” this myth.<sup>18</sup>

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16. In his *Historische Psychologie des Karnevals* (10), Rang uses a similar formulation: “carnival laughter is the first blasphemy” (“das Karneval-Lachen ist die erste Blasphemie”).

17. As in Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, the two aspects of Bakhtin’s world view and his description of culture overlap here.

18. In his book *Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen*, trans. Gabriele Lossack (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1978 [Russian original, *Kategorii srednevekovej kultury*, 1972]),

The inventory of carnival acts, symbols, and signs derives its meaning not only from this parodistic and profane inversion of canonized values, but also from the utopian dimension of the myth—even though the inverted representation of official culture in unofficial culture (the translation of official into unofficial language) determines the overall mechanism of culture. It is in this myth of ambivalence that laughter's universal claim is founded; in it laughter acquires the contours of a world view. And yet, this utopian myth or mythical utopianism, which suspends the temporally bound confrontation of official and unofficial, stages its theater periodically, in time. The provocative, mirthful inversion of prevailing institutions and their hierarchy as staged in the carnival offers a permanent alternative to official culture—even if it ultimately leaves everything as it was before.<sup>19</sup> It is this irrepressible, unsilenceable energy issuing from the carnival's alternative appeal—and not so much the particular manifestations of folk cultural practice—that disrupts official, institutionalized culture.

The concepts of materialism and of ambivalence, which are constitutive for Bakhtin's argumentation, help clarify his utopian ideas and lend new contours to his approach. Bakhtin openly defines folk culture and the culture of laughter as materialistic. His concept of materialism, which one at first might tend to associate with Marxism, turns out upon closer observation to be based on an opposition to spiritualism. Bakhtin—who formulates this point very insistently numerous times throughout the book—is concerned with a positive reevaluation of the material and the corporeal. He resists the emphasis placed on the purely spiritual and takes a decided stance regarding the irreconcilable contradiction between *hyle* and *pneuma* that has always marked the history of Western philosophy and religion. Bakhtin's answer to the traditional revulsion towards the material and the corporeal, which is expressed in particular in gnosticism but also in medieval asceticism and mysticism, is to propound a celebration of matter and the body that seeks to suspend the dualism of mind and matter and that travesties the "victory" of the mystical and the ascetic over the body (*Rabelais*, 248).

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Aron Jakovlevich Gurjewitsch (Gurevich) criticizes the assumption of cultural dualism (to which Bakhtin's concept of folk culture is indebted) as reductionistic.

19. See, for example, the same figure of thought in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. For more on Nietzsche's importance for Bakhtin's thought, see Grübel, "Vorwort," Bakhtin, *Ästhetik des Wortes*.

Bakhtin's promise of salvation lies not, as gnosticism teaches, in the spirit being freed from its bodily shell and seeking salvation through individual stages of purgation, but rather in the grotesque body as the hyperbolization and hypertrophization of corporeality:

The material components of the universe disclose in the human body their true nature and highest potentialities; they become creative, constructive, are called to conquer the cosmos, to organize all cosmic matter. They acquire a historic character. (*Rabelais*, 366)

Bakhtin's concept of materialism, however, has yet another side to it: because matter "embodies" cultural memory (in which all concretely realized cultural acts are represented), it becomes the guarantee for the continued existence of culture. The material and corporeal are namely the manifest as such, they are what is really "real": what matters for Bakhtin is matter. According to Bakhtin, soteriological teachings and ascetic practices rejecting the body cannot be utopian because they are oriented toward the "end" of manifest materiality and reality.

There is, however, no question that Bakhtin avoids dealing with the critical, provocative, indeed even destructive potential of such movements, which, although anti-institutional, are not compatible with his concept of folk culture as a culture of the material. Hence he treats neither monastic mysticism, nor the socially and ideologically revolutionary movements of the medieval heretics, nor the great threat that the sundry gnostic teachings, sects, and secret cults posed to the institutionalized church. Within Bakhtin's model, which thematizes the collective and public domains and which sets forth a universal claim encompassing the entire human species, hermeticism and occult teachings appear to lose their relevance. The unofficiality of the esoteric corresponds neither to the joyous relativity of the carnival nor to the aspect of laughter as contained in the world of the "second revelation."

Bakhtin, who in passing points out Dionysian traces in the carnival, shows little interest in pursuing the influence of the Dionysian mystery cults on the Renaissance.<sup>20</sup> In its concrete, publicly occurring theatricality,

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20. By way of contrast see Edgar Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), which deals with the hermetic culture of the Renaissance. Hermetic culture amalgamated those elements of antiquity which—like the cult of Dionysus, the remains of Orphic religion, and Neo-Platonism—had been taken up by Renaissance

his folk carnival allows for neither frenzy nor ecstasy. In this regard his concept must be clearly delineated from those of Florens Christian Rang and Hans Peter Duerr, as well as from their Nietzschean roots.

In Rang's *Historische Psychologie des Karnevals* it is the will to frenzy, the "Dionysian confusion" that is of central importance. As Rang puts it, "in the intercalary period, the Dionysian orgies of the Orphic religion resurrect occluded chaos" (*Historische Psychologie*, 19). Rang's emphasis on murder and atrocity, the "terrible outbreak of human rabidity" (*ibid.*, 20) strikes an accent which is incompatible with Bakhtin's conception: "in the mystery ritual of masked nocturnal dances and rebellious frenzy there is performed every despicable act, every murder, every form of excess that licentiousness and lunacy have dared to dream" (*ibid.*, 31). As a period of frenzied chaos, the intercalary time set by the calendar—the calendar being the written form of what Rang calls an "astrologics"—excludes everything that is of constitutive importance for Bakhtin. The intercalary time is for Bakhtin the crossing of a threshold, a time of crisis and upheaval in the field of tension existing between law and counter-law. Above all, however, it is a time of restoration, a time of rebirth.

In his book *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization*, Duerr seeks to describe the dialectic of nature and culture.<sup>21</sup> Periods of immersion into the wilderness, in which culture is experienced from the outside, can be interpreted as carnival time. As Duerr notes,

As we pointed out earlier the fence or hedge, separating the domain of the wilderness from that of culture, was not an insurmountable boundary to the archaic mind. At certain times this fence was, in fact, torn down. Those who wanted to live *consciously* within the fence, had to leave the enclosure at least once in their lives. They had to roam the forests as wolves, as "savages." To put it in more modern terms, they had to experience the wilderness, their *animal nature*, within themselves. For their "cultural nature" was only one side of their being which by destiny was inextricably bound to their animal fylgja, visible only to him who stepped across the dividing line, entrusting himself to his "second sight." (*Dreamtime*, 64)

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philosophy (Ficino, Pico della Mirandola) or which had entered into the pictorial imagery of the Renaissance. The secret and the esoteric have no place in Bakhtin's concept.

21. Hans Peter Duerr, *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization*, trans. Felicitas Goodman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985). Further references appear in the text as *Dreamtime*.

The agent in Duerr's sociology of boundary transgression (which entails a total exit from society in order to enter once more into it) is not the carnival collective, but rather night wanderers, werewolves, and witches. The pathos of regeneration is, nonetheless, the same as in Bakhtin:

No matter how great the differences between these groups of people, they were all united by the common theme that "outside of time" they lost their normal, everyday aspect and became beings of the "other" reality, of the beyond, whether they turned into animals or hybrid creatures or whether they reversed their social roles. They might roam bodily through the land or only "in spirit," in ecstasy, with or without hallucinogenic drugs.

"Between the times" indicated a crisis in the ordinary course of things. Normality was rescinded, or rather, order and chaos ceased to be opposites. In such times of crisis, when nature regenerated itself by dying first, humans "died" also, and as ghostly beings ranged over the land in order to contribute their share to the rebirth of nature. (*Dreamtime*, 35)

For Duerr, the occlusion of official culture through frenzy and ecstasy is a transgression of boundaries that leads into the realm of an entirely different semiotic order—an order that no longer permits communication with the official culture. For Bakhtin, by contrast, carnival culture does communicate with this official culture in its concrete textual and corporeal rituals, even though this communication takes place through inversion and negation.<sup>22</sup>

This, however, is the point where the universalistic claim of Bakhtin's utopian materialism, which posits the existence of a manifest world without violence and death (i.e., without the death of the collective, without the death of the species), a world without revulsion towards matter and without the will to destruction, begins to interfere with his phenomenology of concrete forms of laughter as they occur in medieval and Renaissance carnival praxis. This competition between an ideological and a cultural-descriptive approach is characteristic of Bakhtin's entire work,

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22. Julia Kristeva, *Le texte du roman* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 164f., concludes from this that the "transgression" practiced by the carnival is a pseudo-transgression: "La subversion de la parole carnavalesque transgressive est neutralisée par l'abolition de la Loi: C'est la transgression qui domine le carnaval. Mais il ne s'agit que d'une pseudo-transgression, d'un signifié négatif qui a besoin du spectre constant de son positif, la Loi. La parole carnavalesque manque ainsi son propos."

whereby these two approaches occasionally come into direct conflict with one another. This occurs, for example, when the opposition between official and unofficial culture becomes the dominant question and when, in his description of cultural counter-forms, Bakhtin ignores precisely those counter-forms of the ascetic “camp”—even though they are far more radical in their disposition than the merry utterances of the temporary carnivalistic hiatus. Conversely, when the universality of a mythic utopianism, which interprets the life-death process materialistically (“endlessly”), becomes the dominant question, then it still remains unclear as to what sense could be ascribed to the purely temporary periodic manifestation of these utopic forms in the carnival.

This conflict of approaches apparently does not present any great methodological problem for Bakhtin. Rather, he combines ideological and descriptive aspects in an attempt to understand the opposition between the culture of laughter and the culture of the agelasts (the enemies of laughter) as constants within the cultural history of humankind. The utopic, although refracted in its encounter with the historical, nonetheless breaks through it time and time again.

The opposition between the culture of laughter and the culture of the agelasts can be grasped as an opposition between a culture of ambivalence and a culture of dualisms. The culture of dualisms struggles continuously with one principle while at the same time striving for the other; it seeks to bring about a state of complete univocality by applying restrictive practices of sublimation and repression. These dualisms allow neither reconciliation nor mediation between life and death.<sup>23</sup>

In Bakhtin’s conception, ambivalence has the task of regulating the primordial opposition between life and death, to which all other dual forms can be reduced. In this way it functions like the “mediator” in Lévi-Strauss’s structural model of myths.<sup>24</sup>

The ambivalent laughter of the carnival brings the experiencing of this primordial opposition into play. Carnival ambivalence is integrative; indeed it even reflects the order of monovalence,<sup>25</sup> which seeks to shut

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23. This type of “reconciliation” [*Versöhnung*] should be differentiated from Hegel’s concept. Bakhtin’s ambivalence is not so much that of a higher unity of contradictions as of a perspective from whose vantage point the contradictoriness of the contradictions becomes irrelevant.

24. For more on the parallels between Bakhtin and Lévi-Strauss, see Ivanov, “Znachenie idej M. M. Bakhtina,” 36f.

25. Ambivalence also entails the mutual questioning of positions—Bakhtin speaks of



it out entirely and which “narrows down” the world through a permanent process of exclusion and reduction.

The opposition between the unofficial culture of laughter and the official culture of order thus appears to be one between a culture of ambivalence and a culture of monovalence,<sup>26</sup> whereby the latter adheres to a “cosmocentric” model of world interpretation and the former to a model that could be called “oxymoronic.” The two-sided truth of the oxymoron is revealed in the extra-ordinary state of the festival: in the figure of pregnant Death. The festive laughter of the carnival suspends monovalence and reduction, dissolves them in ambivalence, “reconciles” the primordial opposition between life and death. Ambivalence, however, is not eradicated; indeed what is important in the carnival is the playing up of ambivalence, its radicalization. Only in the collective, ambivalent laughter of the carnival can the utopia (of reconciliation) develop; in the festival time it acquires its own “place” on the festival square.

In the carnival, dogma, hegemony, and authority are dispersed through ridicule and laughter. In their stead, change and crisis, which for Bakhtin constitute the primary factors of life and which represent the consequences of the primordial life/death opposition, become the theme of the laugh act. The spectacle staged by carnivalesque rituals is not actually directed against institutions, whose functions and forms are only usurped for a temporary period of time, but rather against the loss of utopian potential brought about by dogma and authority. The festival, however, which is not aimed at work and production and which produces only itself, also releases this utopian potential.

Bakhtin describes the concrete cultural actions in which this interpretation of ambivalence manifests itself, beginning with the conception of the world and ending with its conception of the body. Laughter is the all-encompassing gesture and attitude which answers to the experience of ambivalence, while at the same time representing a basic ability

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the mutual defamiliarization [*Verfremdung*] taking place between official and unofficial culture (*Dostoevsky*, 129). See also Wolfgang Iser, who within the framework of his aesthetics of the comical interprets ambivalence as a “brink phenomenon” [*Kipp-Phänomen*] with the same sort of mechanism (“Das Komische: ein Kipp-Phänomen,” *Poetik und Hermeneutik* 7 [Munich: Fink, 1976], 399-462).

26. For more on the opposition monovalence/ambivalence, see Grübel’s “Vorwort” to Bakhtin, *Ästhetik des Wortes*, 55ff.

of humankind that enables it to overcome “cosmic fear” [*kosmische Angst*].<sup>27</sup>

Cosmic laughter dispels cosmic fear. For Rang, reason is a flight from terror. He defines frenzy [*Rausch*] as “the fear of and the flight from fearlessness, a flight from reason, which, once having freed the soul from the fear of death, established itself as a dead order” (*Historische Psychologie*, 33). The transition from “astrologics,” upon which Rang’s carnival is founded, to reason, which makes possible the flight from terror, is the transition to logocentrism, which can then freely disseminate its death-bringing law. The carnival oscillates between logos and the “demon of frenzy.”<sup>28</sup> The rationality of Bakhtin’s carnival is decentered; i.e., it is not oriented towards *the* definition, *the* one truth. It is a rationality of doubling.<sup>29</sup>

Bakhtin’s laughter is generative, for it invents ever new ways of instrumentalizing ambivalence. For Bakhtin, the prohibition, the marginalization of laughter means the destruction of humankind’s original ability to come to terms with the life/death opposition. The enemies of laughter are the representatives of a restrictive culture that requires both cosmic terror and the fear of individual death to shore up its hegemonic system. In this conception, the official culture of the age-lasts appears as the result of a fall from grace, a fall in which the experience of ambivalence was lost.

As the main focus of his analysis, Bakhtin assembles an inventory of forms of laughter taken from Medieval and Renaissance culture (whereby he postulates these forms as beginning in antiquity).<sup>30</sup> Using this

27. See Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979), 40, where it is “myth” that dispels this “fear.”

28. See the following quotes from Rang, *Historische Psychologie*: “For logos set out upon its victory march as astrologos; the astral religion which created the carnival is the religion of reason, the religion of an order of reason.” And “madness [*Tollheit*] barks out at the law of reason, but reason conceives of a place for madness in its system. Astrologics gives the carnival a place in the calendar, the [carnavalesque] transgression against the law [*Gesetzesbruch*] must compensate for astrologics’ mistake in calculation [*Rechenbruch*]; this is the logic of astrologics: the carnival fills in the intercalary time [*Schaltzeit*].”

29. Kristeva, *Le texte du roman*, 165: “Ne pouvant détruire la vérité symbolique (le signifié en tant que signifié transcendantal), elle [la parole carnalesque] détruit son univocité et lui substitue le DOUBLE.”

30. An interesting carnival genre in which the techniques named by Bakhtin are concentrated is the *sotie*, which Bakhtin, however, did not treat. See Barbara Goth, *Untersuchungen zur Gattungsgeschichte der Sottie* (Munich: Fink, 1967).

inventory, Bakhtin attempts to document how the experience of ambivalence in folk culture always derived from a conflict with agelastic culture. This conflict took place in such a way that the concrete expressions invented by folk culture always corresponded to the official forms prevailing at the time. In this fashion, it would seem, Bakhtin's universally oriented concept acquires both its historical relevance and diachronic contours.

The gay relativity staged in the carnival also affects the culture of laughter itself, i.e., its status vis-à-vis the dominant culture, in whose framework it is realized as laughter laughing at itself. When it gains its free-time and free-space in the annual cycle, it unfolds not as a destructive, but as a regenerative force. The temporary immersion of official culture in folk culture leads to a process of regeneration that sets in motion and dynamically energizes the notions of value and hierarchy inverted by the parodistic counter-norms of the carnival. In this way the culture of laughter revives and regenerates the petrified remains of official institutions and, as it were, hands them back to official culture. In other words, the key question is no longer how ambivalence comes into effect or is realized, but rather which function ambivalence has for the prevailing culture and its patterns. The procedures of profanation, degradation, mesalliance, and familiarization are thus unable to affect permanently the official culture. It is important that this aspect of Bakhtin's concept, too, be emphasized. The countercultural aspect of the culture of laughter is not played out on the same level as that of the official culture. Whereas in the pragmatic realm of official culture normative actions engender certain consequences, the carnivalesque counter-ritual remains without effect in the realm of politically and socially relevant praxis: in the carnival, *phantasma* replaces *pragma*. The free-space and the free-time taken by the culture of laughter and granted by institutional culture—whereby this tolerance belongs to the overall mechanism of culture and occurs as a regular process—mark a special kind of hiatus. In the concept suggested by Bakhtin, it is folk culture alone that preserves cyclical time by marking it regularly with its festivals. It is folk culture alone that mirrors this periodicity as something cosmic and mythic and that creates the “carnival chronotope” in the ludistic conjunction of carnival space (the public marketplace) and carnival time. The carnival chronotope concentrates the process of death and

regeneration in an ensemble of rituals which, by contrast to official ceremonies, are aimed not at retaining power and conserving the system's hierarchy, but rather solely at staging this mythic fact. The success of the chronotope is, however, thwarted by the official institutions, which are obligated to linear and finalistic parameters; after the carnival ends, these institutions once more impart use value to time and space. The omnipotence of daily existence forces the carnival fools to set aside their insignia and to store away their carnival knowledge for yet another year. However, the omnipotence of laughter, conscious of its own periodic return, transgresses both the concrete media in which it expresses itself and the historical space and time in which it is actualized. The interfacing of the universal-anthropological and temporal-ludistic determines Bakhtin's axiology of the carnival.

In his *Rethinking Anthropology*, E. R. Leach takes up and further differentiates Durkheim's idea of the festival as the transition from a normal, profane order of things to an abnormal, sacred one (and back again), a change that serves to mark the flow of time.<sup>31</sup> Leach is concerned with describing the transposition of profane structures into the exalted structure of the sacred. Although the sacred shares elementary functions with Bakhtin's carnival, the phases suggested by Leach differ from Bakhtin's interpretation in a number of ways: Phase A refers to sacralization, separation, and "death"; Phase B to the borderline situation, the sacred state in which the course of normal life is arrested; Phase C to desacralization, the return and reincorporation of the sacred into the profane, to "re-birth," and to the new beginning of secular time; Phase D to normal, secular life, which Leach interprets as an interval between festivals.

In this schema, Phase A represents the inversion of Phase C, Phase B the opposite of Phase D (*Rethinking Anthropology*, 134). Of the three forms of behavior in ritual situations there is only one corresponding to Bakhtin's conception:

And finally in a few relatively rare instances, we find an extreme form of revelry in which the participants play-act at being precisely the opposite of what they really are; men act as women, women as men, kings as beggars, servants as masters, acolytes as bishops. In such situations of true orgy, normal life is played in reverse, with

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31. Edmund R. Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (New York: Athlone Press, 1968), 6. Further references appear in the text as *Rethinking Anthropology*.

all manners of sins such as incest, adultery, transvestitism, sacrilege, and lèse-majesté treated as the order of the day. (*Rethinking Anthropology*, 135)

With his distinction between formality, masquerade, and role exchange Leach describes various forms of festival behavior relating to the above-named stages and points out mechanisms not observed by Bakhtin: for Leach, formality and masquerade form a pair of opposites (a rigid form, e.g., a wedding, can end in masquerade, and a masquerade, e.g., a New Year's festival or carnival, can end in formality); formality and masquerade correspond to Phases A and C. Role reversal corresponds to Phase B as the symbol of a complete transposition of the secular and profane to the sacred: "normal time has stopped, sacred time is played in reverse, death is converted into birth" (*Rethinking Anthropology*).

Traces of classical historiography are also evident in the enthusiastic utopianism of Bakhtin's conception: carnival appears as the return of the "Golden Age" and as the vision of a future world of emancipated laughter that no longer knows "cosmic fear"—in other words, a classical utopia motif of paradise lost and regained, of the Promised Land.<sup>32</sup> For Bakhtin, the suspension of alienation that these motifs treat has both a historical dimension and a universal one pertaining to human existence in the cosmos. The cosmic terror afflicting the species-body of humanity is stronger than the individual's fear of his or her individual death.<sup>33</sup> The principle of laughter, which suspends this terror by translating it into the language of the material and the corporeal, can thus be interpreted as *the* principle generating culture. One could even go so far as to claim that the official culture of the agelasts (as a reduced, rudimentary form) was ultimately generated out of the principle of laughter. Only that type of culture brought forth in laughter can reflect processuality, upheaval, transition, return, that which has no end. The principle of laughter guarantees the regeneration of the species-body, the accumulation of cultural

32. See Waclaw Bolecki's interpretation, "Język. Polifonia. Karnawał." (Language. Polyphony. Carnival.), *Teksty* 3, no. 33 (1977): 7-33.

33. One can interpret the opposition of zoe/bios formulated by Karl Kerényi in *Die Mysterien von Eleusis* (Zurich: Rhein Verlag, 1962) and in *Dionysos, Urbild des unzerstörbaren Lebens* (Munich: Langen Müller, 1976) as a pendant to Bakhtin's distinction between the death of the genre and the death of the individual, of the collective and of the private body. Zoe refers to "the life of people and all living beings in general"; bios is "the characterized life of human beings, for which death is the end-point" (*Mysterien*, 12). Dionysos is interpreted as "archetypal [in Jung's sense] reality of zoe" (*Dionysos*, 110).

experience as a collective memory that manifests itself cyclically in the concrete forms of carnival rituals as an anti-eschatological promise of redemption. The carnival culture has no *telos*.

By contrast, the official culture of the age-lasts, which has succumbed to cosmic terror, is in its structure finalistic and directed toward the “end.” Finalistic is also its concept of work and production. In age-lastic culture, all forms of exclusion, repression, sublimation, and reduction are aimed at reducing and univocalizing meaning, at establishing *the* single truth that for Bakhtin means the “end” of the movement of ambivalence.

Seen in the context of this universal pretension, Renaissance culture is accorded by Bakhtin a special place in the history of humankind. Bakhtin’s main theme here is the unique convergence of folk culture and high culture: in the Renaissance, the boundaries between official and unofficial appear to be suspended, forms of laughter intrude into the highest spheres of literature and ideology. The dominant world model is based on the experience of ambivalence:

In the Renaissance, laughter in its most radical, universal, and at the same time gay form emerged from the depths of folk culture; it emerged but once in the course of history, over a period of some fifty or sixty years . . . and entered with its popular (vulgar) language into the sphere of great literature and high ideology. (*Rabelais*, 72)

(As examples of this unique cultural event Bakhtin points to Boccaccio, Rabelais, Cervantes, and Shakespeare). For Bakhtin, the Renaissance is a sample of realized utopia. On this account it is understandable why Bakhtin approaches the culture of laughter in Rabelais’s work by positing a homology between the praxis of the culture of laughter and literary praxis, a “language” common to both.

Bakhtin’s concept of materialism also has consequences for his notion of how cultural signs function and his concept of the interrelationship between carnival praxis and literature. Decisive in this regard—and this would appear to mark a unique position within the history of semiotic theory—is the emphasis that he places on materiality, or, more precisely, on the material dimension of the sign.

According to this approach, all cultural artifacts (Bakhtin calls them “products of ideological creation,” i.e., works of art, scholarly treatises,

religious symbols, rites, etc.) manifest themselves as material things. Moreover, they are things of a special kind in that they transmit sense, form meaning, and have value. Value and meaning, however, exist only in and through materiality. In other words, values and meanings become an ideological (i.e., cultural) reality only after they have been realized in the sounds (words), actions, clothing, manners, and forms of organization which human beings assign to themselves and to things—in short, only after having been objectified in a semiotic material.

In the exteriorization of the sign as sound, gesture, matter and as a visible, tangible formation, there occurs a semiotic mis-en-scène of matter. Bakhtin speaks of the body-sign [*telo-znak*]<sup>34</sup> whose realization alone is meaningful, bears meaning. A severing of meaning from the body or the separation of matter and semiotic value is thus not possible in Bakhtin's conception, and it is precisely this interplay of matter and sign, of *soma* and *sema*, the play of a somatic semiotic, that constitutes culture for Bakhtin. Every coalition of matter and sign, i.e., every form of ideological creation, has its own language and its own techniques. It is the description of their specific morphology that becomes the focus of Bakhtin's approach.

The language of the carnival (a system composed of signs which, when selected according to particular rules and combined in sequences, produce cultural meaning) has at its disposal a certain number of paradigms determined by the principle of laughter. These paradigms are: gay relativity, instability, openness and infiniteness, the metamorphic, ambivalence, the eccentric, materiality and corporeality, excess, the exchange of value positions (up/down, master/slave), and the sensation of the universality of being. These paradigms determine both the semantic qualities and the form acquired by all facts of the culture of laughter: even those elements which intrude into the culture of laughter from other realms are subordinated to them. In his description

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34. To understand this semiotic theory it is necessary to consider also the works that Bakhtin wrote under the names of several of his pupils. For more on the concept of the "body-sign," see Pavel Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, trans. Albert Wehrle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) [Russian original *Formal'nyj metod v literaturovedenii* (Leningrad: Priboj, 1928)]; and Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973) [Russian original *Marksizm i Filosofija jazyka* (Leningrad: Priboj, 1929)]. For more on this case of authorial masquerade, which was carried on because of censorship problems, see Ivanov, "Znachenie idej M. M. Bakhtina," 44.

of carnival language, Bakhtin sets up an inventory of elements which he calls “images” (a more proper term would perhaps be “symbols”); like words of verbal language, they are able to form sequences, that is, in this case concrete carnival acts. This inventory or lexicon of symbols contains the schemata for all concretely realized manifestations of laugh rituals: the linking of birth and death, the apotheosis of fools, the humiliation of objects and persons belonging to the official cult, the open demonstration of the concealed (sexuality, digestion), the exchange of socially and sexually specific clothing and gestures, masquerade, the celebration of feasts, the intrusion into the body’s or the earth’s interior, and dismemberment.

Bakhtin makes clear that the carnival language which prevailed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance bears within itself an older, long-buried language which speaks along with it, namely that of myth. The individual sign’s diversity of meaning, which is exploited by the Renaissance culture of laughter, arises out of the overlaying of “original” carnival meanings by other meanings, which for their part have assimilated new cultural experiences and new world models in the course of the development of what Bakhtin calls the “thousand-year folk culture.” These meanings are stored within the individual sign in a multitude of heterogeneous layers. Bakhtin’s main concern is not only to reflect the genetic dimension of the individual sign, but also to show how the original language, which developed in an “archaic syncretism”<sup>35</sup> through the mixture of different sign systems, changes and how it achieves a new kind of syncretism in the Renaissance. This new syncretism is the actual thematic focus of Bakhtin’s descriptive and interpretative interest.

The Renaissance folk culture of laughter absorbed a series of forms which are related to it by virtue of certain elementary functions. Each of these forms has its own history as well as a history of hybridizations

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35. The concept of archaic syncretism was apparently borrowed by Bakhtin from Aleksandr Veselovskij, “Tri glavy iz istoricheskoi poetiki” (Three Chapters from Historical Poetics), in *Sobranie Sochinenij* (St. Petersburg: Izd. Otielenia Russkago Iozyka i Slovesnosti Imp. Akademii Navka, 1913). Boris Vladimirovic Kazanskij developed this concept further in his “Ideja istoricheskoi poetiki” (The Idea of Historical Poetics), in *Poetika* (Leningrad: Priboj, 1925), 6-23. For more on these connections, see Stanislaw Balbus in his foreword to the Polish edition of Mikhail Bakhtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais’go a kultura ludowa sredniowiecza i renesansa*, trans. Anna and Andrzej Goreniewie (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1975), 23.



with other forms. It is the syncretistic, hybrid character of these forms that determines the basic character of language in Renaissance folk culture;<sup>36</sup> the carnival functions as their concrete exponent. The carnival, as a syncretistic form composed of various folkloric rites (*Rabelais*, 218), is not merely a counter-rite acting as the formal inversion of official rites, but also coalesces with those parodistic tendencies which in a certain sense arose within the confines of “serious” culture and which always worked to undermine certain ancient and Christian traditions vested with sacral and cultural authority. With this in mind, Bakhtin speaks of the parodistic-carnivalistic implication of the old Corpus Christi festival, and he conceives of the classical Symposium and the Christian Last Supper in the same tradition as that of the parodistic banquet (*Rabelais*, 229-31).

Thus the carnival, as a hybridizing manifestation of the folk culture of laughter as it emerged in the Renaissance, integrated into itself heterogeneous elements borrowed from various areas of cultural praxis (for example, ritual strategies taken from “donkey days,” masquerades and processions, the *risus paschalis*, the *parodia sacra*, etc.) and transformed these all into a functioning “system” of amalgamations. In Bakhtin’s interpretation, however, there also exists in the Renaissance an ensemble of pre-forms, of formal anticipations which are derived not so much from so-called classical antiquity as from “carnivalized antiquity.” Authors of late antiquity such as Lucian, Athanaïos, Aulus Gellius, Plutarch, and Macrobius, and forms such as the “mimic tradition,” the dialogue, and in particular the symposium (*Rabelais*, 98) are representative of this carnivalization. Bakhtin views the connection between this “carnivalized” antiquity and the Renaissance as a very close one:

The antique tradition has an essential meaning for the Renaissance, which offered an apology of the literary tradition of laughter and brought it into the sphere of humanist ideas. As to the aesthetic practice of Renaissance laughter, it is first of all determined by the traditions of the medieval culture of folk humor. (*Rabelais*, 71)

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36. The principle of syncretism in Nietzsche’s conception is valid for language as a whole, which is metaphorical, an amalgamating phenomenon. In *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* (On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense) it is evident that he interprets every kind of meaningfulness as being based on a mixing of sign systems.

Bakhtin, however, sees in the Renaissance not only the fusion of a carnivalized antiquity and the folk culture of the Middle Ages but also a historically “unique” amagamation of high culture and folk culture.

In his interpretation the Renaissance no longer corresponds to a classical model of culture, but rather represents a hybrid cultural formation distinguished by its ability to integrate, amalgamate, and coalesce with non-classical forms of cultural activity. The Renaissance thus represents a type of culture that is more centrifugal than centripetal, that breaks down canons and hierarchies more than it builds them up. It is a type of culture allowing fusions and interfaces between the individual semiotic systems which constitute it (something also applying to the convergence of folk culture and literary praxis).

At this point one must once more pose the question as to the relationship between literature and folk culture. Bakhtin’s analysis suggests two different aspects. For one, it assumes that literary texts mirror carnivalesque praxis: Rabelais’s work appears as the reflection of folk culture’s acts, his linguistic praxis as the reconstruction of its forms of language. It is under this aspect that one must view the relation between folk culture and literature: on the one hand, as the relation between that which is represented and the process of representation and, on the other, as the relation between matter and representation. For another, Bakhtin’s treatment of Rabelais’s novel assumes something like a parallel relationship between two sign systems, each of which has its own tradition. In as much as both sign systems—folk culture and literary praxis—are homologous, they make possible the transposition or translation from one into the other. However, in the process, there is left behind an “untranslatable” residue, an ineradicable difference in which the tension between the two semiotic ensembles continues to exist. In his book on Dostoevsky’s poetics, in which, as we mentioned earlier, he already accorded the theme of the carnival and carnival literature a thorough treatment and in which the central theses of his overall concept are formulated, Bakhtin treats this specific “translatability with residues,” the simultaneous congruence and incongruence of these two languages:

Carnival has worked out an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms—from large and complex mass actions to individual carnivalistic gestures. This language, in a differentiated and even (as in any language) articulate way, gave expression to a

unified (but complex) carnival sense of the world, permeating all its forms. This language cannot be translated in any full or adequate way into a verbal language, and much less into a language of abstract concepts, but is amenable to a certain transposition into a language of artistic images that has something in common with its concretely sensuous nature; that is, it can be transposed into the language of literature. We are calling this transposition of carnival into the language of literature the carnivalization of literature. (*Dostoevsky*, 122)

Two aspects are contained in the concept of “carnivalization” [*karn-evalizacija*]. The first is the process of amalgamation, which places heterogeneous forms at the service of laughing folk culture and which can be defined as a cultural act. The second aspect—and this is Bakhtin’s major concern—is that a genre is formed in which the role of literature itself appears to be changed by its assimilation of functions taken over from the culture of laughter. The genre “carnivalized literature” thus presupposes the cultural praxis “carnival” and the process of amalgamation which makes this praxis possible. (This supposition concerning genre formation has also been raised in regard to tragedy, which similarly can be traced back to a ritual practice, that of mime.) In Bakhtin’s conception, carnivalistic literature takes over the carnival’s original function, since in his view the carnival itself ceased being a source for the carnivalization of culture after the second half of the seventeenth century. Consequently, Rabelais’s work, which still reflects a direct contact with the carnival, becomes the main paradigm of carnivalized literature in the post-carnival era. (Just as in carnivalized literature, literature undergoes a functional shift, so the transposition of the carnival into literature marks a functional shift of the carnivalistic.) The problem here is that the concept of carnivalized literature, which modifies the writing of literary history and with which Bakhtin seeks to define a unique literary tradition, is hardly suited for defining literary genres in the strict sense of the word. In Bakhtin’s conception there are, no doubt, genres that can act as representatives of carnivalized literature, in particular the so-called Menippean satire, which since antiquity has been recognized as an autonomous genre. However, the Menippean satire does not represent the basic literary genre that evolved directly from the carnival, but rather a hybridized genre that in its disruption of epic and tragic distance “answers” the crisis of

crisis of the official high genres. In this sense the Menippea could be conceived of as a form which expresses the same relationship to established literature and its hierarchies that the carnival expresses in regard to dominant official culture. However, in order not to leave completely open the question of how cultural praxis is transferred into literature, one could (by once more recurring to Bakhtinian notions) interpret the Menippea as a representation of genre memory which preserves traces of an archaic carnival gesture, of an archaic syncretism, and of an archaic, parodistic attitude in a verbal text. The Menippea could then introduce these traces into all later genres with which it comes into contact. In this fashion the genre exists in the present time of its concrete realization, while at the same time recalling its past character, its beginnings, and the archaic communication situation which brought it forth; it represents “creative memory in the process of literary development” (*Dostoevsky*, 106). Bakhtin links the tradition of the Menippean satire with such names as Menippos of Gadara (considered its founder) Lucian, Apuleius, and Petronius and others, and situates Rabelais and Dostoevsky within this tradition.

In his Dostoevsky book (without mention of Rabelais’s work and the Renaissance) Bakhtin attempted to formulate genre characteristics of the Menippea and simultaneously to apply them to the novel in its non-epic form. These characteristics, which are not always coupled with one another and which can occur in varying degrees of dominance, are parody (as the creation of a “degrading double” and of a “world turned inside out and upside down”), the element of laughter itself, the experimental phantastic, the so-to-speak free and unmotivated choice of plot not oriented towards a code of probability, syncretism of form, eccentricity of theme, as, for example, the treatment of “last questions,” the portrayal of threshold situations, the description of anomalies, manias, psychopathologies, scandals, and finally a utopian, universalistic attitude towards the world.

If, on the one hand, Bakhtin adheres to the Menippea as the exemplary genre of carnivalized literature, on the other, his main concern is to identify the basic characteristics of carnivalized literature using a catalogue of four “carnival categories” which go well beyond the bounds of his special genre and in which the novel in particular plays a prominent role as a modern-day relative of the Menippea. The first such category is “the familiar,” that is, the contact which takes place on the

horizontal level in the carnival and which replaces the vertical hierarchy of official culture. The second category, “the eccentric,” can be described as a process of bringing forth the repressed, of publicly exposing that which is concealed. Above all, however, it refers to the egression of the individual from the center that normally fixes his or her identity, and to his or her entrance into the space of the transindividual carnival community. This community in turn is part of a greater festival, a festival “of all-annihilating and all-renewing time” (*Dostoevsky*, 124). The third category, which Bakhtin calls “carnivalistic mesalliances,” describes the contact of everything with everything else, the mixing of up and down, of the sacred and the profane, a contact which crisscrosses (and crosses up) all hierarchies and discrete realms. With his last category, that of “profanation,” Bakhtin refers to the semantic realm of blasphemous, parodistic, and obscene inversion.

It is arguable whether these concepts are true categories. As Bakhtin himself admits, they are more like “concretely sensuous” or “played-out,” ritually depicted “thoughts” (*Dostoevsky*, 123), but he still insists on the importance of their form-building structure with its wide-ranging consequences for literature. In other words, Bakhtin interprets these “categories,” which he arrived at through an analysis of literature, as principles that also organize this literature. Bakhtin succeeds in uncovering these principles in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

Bakhtin’s analytical approach is thus concerned with techniques of mixing genres and styles, with the intercrossing of official discourses (of the sciences, especially of medicine, jurisprudence, theology, and philosophy) with the unofficial discourse of folk culture, with transgressions against decorum, with the treatment of “extreme” themes, and with a parodistic, travesty orientation toward works of high literature. Above all, he is interested in the stylistic syncretism of such works, which not only reflect the linguistic praxis of their time (a praxis which answers to a crisis situation by tending to form hybrids) but also employ this praxis as a pattern for their own stylistic devices. Rabelais, whose place in the humanist context of the Renaissance is clearly underlined by Bakhtin, represents that stage of reflection (in itself already a deviation from the Middle Ages) which has recognized the split between official and unofficial culture as a crisis and which makes this crisis visible as the point of intersection between two cultural spheres.

From Bakhtin’s point of view, the borderline between official and

unofficial culture runs along the linguistic borderline between Latin and the vulgar language, or, more precisely, along the borderline separating three languages: classical Latin, medieval Latin, and the vernacular. Their confrontation or hybridization, which takes place according to a “gay grammar,” creates new forms of temporal consciousness. Similarly, the Renaissance discovers dialects and employs them as linguistic masks, as for example in the *commedia dell’arte*. Pulcinell’s foolish use of words arises precisely in the intersection of these languages. This heteroglossia breaks down dogma and sets free “forbidden” meanings. The words freed from the strictures of official meaning can now set out on their merry way to becoming billingsgate and comical nicknames. Bakhtin, who conducts numerous individual interpretations in the context of his Rabelais analysis, comes to the conclusion that in the carnival all proper and genre names tend to become nicknames that are both laudatory and insulting and that all phenomena and objects can be subjugated to this double function, for in Bakhtin’s view their *principium individuationis* lies in praise and insult, in positivization and negativization:

But the more unofficial and familiar the speech, the more often and substantially are those tones combined, the less distinct is the line dividing praise and abuse. Indeed the two coincide in one person or object as representing the world of becoming. The hard, official lines of division between objects, phenomena, and values begin to fade. There is an awakening of the ancient ambivalence of all words and expressions, combining the wish of life and death, of sowing and rebirth. (*Rabelais*, 420)

Bakhtin is concerned with seeking out the traces of ambivalence and double meaning in the curse word and in profane, degrading nicknames—something which he succeeds in doing in his remarkable analyses of Rabelais’s poetics of cursing.<sup>37</sup> The principle of ambivalence

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37. See, for example the following: “Abuse is the most ancient form of ambivalent negative imagery” and “everywhere where meanings exist for a fully unofficial, living communication, words strive for this ambivalent fullness” (*Rabelais*, 410). These statements are analogous both to Goethe’s observation on the ambivalence of words (the obscene expression can be understood as a sign of admiration, the death wish as mockery [see the chapter titled “Moccoli,” cited by Bakhtin, in *Das Römische Karneval*]) and to the theory of the “Counter-Meaning of Primordial Words” (*Gegensinn der Urworte*), developed by Freud in 1910 following the work done by the language researcher Karl Abel in 1884

manifests itself in the stylistic realm in two ways: first, in the contact or hybridization of different languages that stages a dialogue between them, and second in the individual word itself, which within itself allows two positions of meaning or value to contact one another—once more in dialogic fashion.

Hybridization and the dialogical<sup>38</sup> are of decisive importance for the semantic formation of texts in the Menippean tradition. These aspects are summarized by Bakhtin in his definition of the hybridized, that is, mixed, dialogical word:

What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages,” two semantic and axiological belief systems.<sup>39</sup>

In communicative terms, the category of the dialogical, which describes a dynamic confluence of meaning, is positive and reconciliatory. On the other hand, if one emphasizes the aspect of stylistic friction, i.e., the difference between heterogeneous styles (as already mentioned, the concern here is not only with two styles and languages but with a pluralism of styles and languages), there then arises a more disharmonic chord: the hybrid and the syncretic cause the single, consolidated meaning to disperse, and thus the images of concrete reality cannot congeal in spite of their “realism.” The syncretic gesture dissolves semantic cores and at the same time allows meanings stemming from a multitude of different contexts to unfold. The syncretic gesture plays a game with heterogeneous meaning, a game permitted by the mixing together of individual discourse types of the Renaissance which in turn employ their own peculiar styles and languages: the language of the marketplace and fairground booths, the language of medicine and jurisprudence, the language of the Sorbonne

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(Sigmund Freud, *Psychologische Studien*. Studienausgabe Bd. IV).

38. For more on the problem of dialogicity see my own “Dialogizität und praktische Sprache,” in *Dialogizität*, 51-62, as well as the collection *Roman und Gesellschaft, Internationales Michail Bakhtin Colloquium*, ed. B. Wilhelmi (Jena: Schiller Universität, 1984); Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*; and Grübel, “Vorwort,” Bakhtin, *Ästhetik des Wortes*, 42ff.

39. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 304.

theologians and of philosophical disputation, the language of the monastery and the Church. Rabelais parodistically depicts all the above-named discursive “idioms” as roles and (in particular in his overflowing word catalogues) practices a free kind of comical word creation drawing on all possible stylistic backgrounds—something that became a tradition of its own in the Renaissance.

In addition to the gesture of semantic dispersion, we also find that of semantic concentration, of concealment, of the cryptic. Bakhtin recognized this aspect of Rabelais’s novel, but did not undertake a further deciphering of its hermetic elements.<sup>40</sup> In his interpretation, the novel appears as a freewheeling, unbounded play with meaning that avoids committing itself to any single one, a game that strives neither for identity, nor substance, nor definition. It is, as Julia Kristeva phrases it in her *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art and Literature*, a “hieroglyphic spectacle” that refuses to “define a psychic universe”<sup>41</sup> and in which “phantasmagoria and symbolism” mix with a “macabre naturalism” (*Desire in Language*, 82). To this one can add still another aspect: meaning that cannot be traced back to a center—i.e., an eccentric meaning—always refers back to “something else”; by denying identity it embraces alterity.

Just as in the carnival act, where the person disappears behind the mask and finds in it his or her *Doppelgänger*, in Rabelais the “person” appears as nonidentical to her or himself, as ex-centric, behind a mask of language. From under this mask of language the censored, unofficial consciousness moves outwards; internal speech becomes external.<sup>42</sup>

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40. See, for example, the recent work by Florence M. Weinberg, *The Wine and the Will: Rabelais' Bacchic Christianity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972), especially the chapter “Rabelais’s Hermeticism.”

41. Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art and Literature*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 84. Originally published as *Semeiotike. Recherche pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1979). Further references appear in the text as *Desire in Language*.

42. In *Frejdlizm* (Freudianism) (Moskva: Gos. Izd-vo, 1927) which appeared in 1927 under the name of Voloshinov, Bakhtin describes Freud’s unconscious as “unofficial consciousness” (English translation, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I. R. Titunik [New York: Academic Press, 1976]). The dialectic of unofficial and official consciousness corresponds to those of inner and outer speech, an opposition which is constitutive for Vygotskij’s theory of language development. See Lev Semenovich Vygotskij, *Denken und Sprechen*, ed. J. Helm, intro. Thomas Luckmann (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1977), in particular Chapter 7. “The wider the breach between the official and the unofficial conscious, the more difficult it becomes for motives of inner speech to turn into outward



Carnivalized speech is a means of tying together the “unconscious” and the social milieu, whereby the opposition of “we” experiences and “I” experiences (which relate to the corporeal and sexual) is suspended: the ineffable “I” and the expressible “we” merge in the language of the carnival collective.<sup>43</sup>

The concept of the “double,”<sup>44</sup> of doubling, of the *Doppelgänger* (which has been further developed with particular recourse to Bakhtin’s ideas) refers not to a splitting of the ego, but rather to ambivalence in the person. More important, in any case, for Bakhtin’s argumentation is the question of how the body is brought into play in this process, for it is the body that becomes the stage for eccentricity. It is the body that transgresses its own boundaries, that plays up its own exaggeration: the grotesque body. Bakhtin reconstructs the image of the grotesque body contained in Rabelais’s text and increasingly shifts it into the focal point of his interest. In doing so, his prime concern is the return of the body in the Renaissance, whereby the reevaluation of the role played by the body in the cosmos is decisive:

All things in the universe, from heavenly bodies to elements, had left their former place in their hierarchy [Bakhtin means in the Renaissance— R.L.] and moved to the single horizontal plane of the world of becoming, where they began to seek a new place and to achieve new formations. The center around which these perturbations took place was precisely the human body, uniting all the varied patterns of the universe. (*Rabelais*, 365)

Herein one can find a reformulation of the Renaissance concept propagated by Pico della Mirandola in which the human being exists as something in a process of becoming and not as something closed, as something bound within a universal sympathy, within a correspondence relation between micro- and macrocosm that has become disengaged

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speech (oral or written or printed, in a circumscribed or broad social milieu) wherein they might acquire formulation, clarity, and rigor” (*Freudianism*, 89).

43. These dialectically functioning oppositions correspond to the opposition between “I” experience and “we” experience [*Ich-Erfahrung/Wir-Erfahrung*], whereby ego experience ultimately tends towards the prelinguistic and alinguistic and “we” experience towards what can be verbalized and communicated.” See Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 148; and Ivanov, “Znachenie idej M.M. Bakhtina,” 25ff.

44. Kristeva, *Le texte du roman*, 165f. This study represents the most far-reaching attempt to interpret and transform Bakhtin’s theory.

from the hierarchy of up and down. The carnivalesque variant of this is inversion: down instead of up, earth instead of heaven, backside instead of the head (hence the carnivalistic gesture of doing handstands). The medicine of the Renaissance also displays a new interest in the body, as, for example, in the dissection of corpses and the meticulous description of pathologies. This has its carnivalesque pendant in the gay dismemberment of bodies, in the ridiculing of death, and in the obscene exposure of the body. The inordinate interest of the Renaissance in feces, evacuation, and their accompanying manifestations is “documented” by Rabelais in his “ass-wiping” episode, which Bakhtin, in his description of an anti-medieval world view (one of his most scintillating interpretations) treats as a parodistic inversion: “Dung and urine lend a bodily character to matter, to the world, to the cosmic elements . . . urine and dung transform cosmic terror into a gay carnival monster” (*Rabelais*, 365).

The grotesque view of the world permits the boundary between body and world to be drawn in a different way than the “natural” boundary allows. Excrement, as a carnival substance, becomes the mediator between earth and body, between the living body which gives birth to the dead body and the dead body which gives birth to the living one. The body becomes a lusty and degrading waystation between the grave and the cradle; scatology replaces eschatology.

The de-limiting [*Entgrenzung*] of the body and the meeting of the human being and the world takes place in the gulping, biting, and masticating mouth: “Man’s encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man’s advantage” (*Rabelais*, 281).<sup>45</sup>

In the slaughter feast, another carnival chronotope, the interior of the animal body (the innards) are “exteriorized”; they are torn out of the animal body and immediately consumed and incorporated into the human body, an act performed in the carnival by the gigantic mouth, the gorge. Bakhtin shows this in Garganella’s tripe-eating orgy, which is suddenly transformed into an act of birth: Gargamell gorges herself on the tripe and then disgorges Pantagruel. This taking in and giving out is a kind of barter transaction between the body and the world.

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45. See Kerényi, *Die Mysterien von Eleusis*, 12. “Zoe refers not only to the life of people and all living beings in general, but also that which is eaten.” Zoe is Dionysus.

In its carnivalesque definition the slaughter feast conceals the ambivalence of yet another festival which can be viewed as its archaic forerunner, namely the totem feast. In his book *Totem and Taboo* Freud calls this festival “a permitted, or rather an obligatory, excess, a solemn breach of a prohibition.”<sup>46</sup> The thing consumed during the meal was the totem animal, which, however, was a father substitute. The devouring of the father is simultaneously an expression of primal guilt and the insuring of one’s own immortality. As Freud puts it, “The sacrifice was a sacrament and the sacrificial animal was itself a member of the clan. It was in fact the ancient totem animal, the primitive god himself, by the killing and consuming of which the clansmen renewed and assured their likeness to God” (*Totem and Taboo*, 138). The totem festival is a festival of eating which the community permits itself to indulge in at times and which in the transition from lamentation of the dead to festive merry-making reproduces the life/death opposition in its status as a (pre-)cultural act.

This archaic figure of interpretation also occurs in Greek mythology, however, with a difference in the object being consumed. The myth narrates the rites of dismemberment or tearing apart [*sparagmos*] of the son of God (Dionysius, Pentheus) by his mother or other women [*maenads*], the rites of his being eaten (*omophagia* or *theophagia*, in which the mother consumes the son), and finally the necessary reunification of the dismembered limbs. This process of *sparagmos* and reunification has been interpreted by Jan Kott in the following way: “The dismembering and reunification of Dionysius is the cosmic myth of eternal return, renewal, a myth of death and rebirth, chaos and cosmos.”<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin, so it would seem, reads carnival praxis as the realization of a myth whose focus is the body.

In Bakhtin’s carnival there is no purely individual body; the grotesque body, which consists of “excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices,” presents “another, newly conceived body”—it is “a point of transition in a life eternally renewed” (*Rabelais*, 318). This can be linked with a thought of George Bataille, who in his book *Death and Sensuality*

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46. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 140. Further references appear in the text as *Totem and Taboo*.

47. Jan Kott, *The Eating of the Gods: An Interpretation of Greek Tragedy*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski and Edward J. Czerwinski (New York: Random House, 1970), 208. Kott develops these first set forth by M. Eliade, in particular in *Le mythe de l'éternel retour. Archétypes et répétitions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) and *Mythes, rêves et mystères* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

sees the ambivalence between life and death in the violent act of maintaining continuity (an act which includes killing) and which suspends the discontinuity of individual life:<sup>48</sup> “The excess from which reproduction proceeds and the excess we call death can each only be understood with the help of the other (*Death and Sensuality*, 36).

The death of the one being is correlated with the birth of the other, heralding it and making it possible. Life is always a product of the decomposition of life. Life first pays its tribute to death which disappears, then to corruption following on death and bringing back into the cycle of change the matter necessary for the ceaseless arrival of new beings into the world. (*Death and Sensuality*, 49)

In Bakhtin’s thought, the achievement of transindividuality and “earthly immortality” in the flesh of new generations (*Rabelais*, 405) corresponds to Bataille’s striving for a “divine continuity,” which is closely associated with “the transgression of the law on which the order of discontinuous beings is founded” (*Death and Sensuality*, 78). Continuity is experienced in acts of excess, which in turn suspend discontinuity:

A violent death [which Bataille views as a consequence of sacral eroticism—R.L.] disrupts the creature’s discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. (*Death and Sensuality*, 16)

Life is a door into existence: life may be doomed but the continuity of existence is not. The nearness of this continuity and its heady quality are more powerful than the thought of death. . . . The pathway into [this] unknowable and incomprehensible continuity . . . is the secret of eroticism and eroticism alone can reveal it. (*Death and Sensuality*, 18)

Bakhtin’s main concern is to show the ambivalence between life and death as it is concentrated in one point, in one act, in one place: namely in the female body, which is the corporeal grave of man and the cavity

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48. George Bataille, *Death and Sensuality. A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962). Further references appear in the text as *Death and Sensuality*.

of his birth in one (*Rabelais*, 407-8). It is the place in which he dies and out of which he is born again: "In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven" (*Rabelais*, 317). In its peculiar status as something living and dying, the body is a "double body" (*Rabelais*, 318):<sup>49</sup> "The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection. One body offers its death, another its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image" (*Rabelais*, 322).

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body should never be thought of as something complete, but rather as something becoming and dying, as part of a never-ending process. Through the particular emphasis placed on all bodily parts and protuberances extending out past the smooth contours of the closed body (nose, phallus, stomach, behind) the borderline between two bodies is reproduced in the body itself. The above-named bodily parts, in particular the phallus and the nose, are always conceived of by Bakhtin as detachable, replaceable "doubles" of the body; by protruding out beyond the body and into the world, they exemplify the overcoming of the border between body and world (*Rabelais*, 317).<sup>50</sup>

Such a conception can hardly be reconciled with the official canon of the body as expressed in European literature. This canon is based on an "entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual"; it denies the existence of bulges, sprouts, or protuberances and closes all bodily orifices (*Rabelais*, 320). The privatized and psychologized body loses its grotesque ambivalence and becomes a monovalent entity confronted by its individual death, whereas the grotesque collective body, which represents the de-limitation of this boundary, remains unaffected by death.

The main principle of the official semiotics of the body is the

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49. In his book *Der übersinnliche Leib. Beiträge zur Metaphysik des Körpers* (Reinbek: Rowahlt, 1982), Gerd Matenkloft speaks of Nietzsche's "dream knowledge of the collective body" (32), of the "multilingual body" as opposed to the "unilingual one." Bakhtin's "double body" can be interpreted as a counterpart to the "two-voiced, dialogical word."

50. See, for example, Gogol's association of the grotesque body with the motif of the *Doppelgänger* in his story "The Nose." Bakhtin inserted into his *Rabelais* book a chapter on "Rabelais and Gogol" that he later deleted because of heavy criticism. The article appeared in his posthumously published studies.

concealedness of the body's insides. By contrast, carnival semiotics allows the inner realm to enter eccentrically into the outside world and vice versa: it stages the penetration of the outside into the bodily insides as a spectacle. The boundary marking the division between the body's insides and outside is suspended through the two movements of protruding and penetrating. The body that censorship has caused to disappear reappears, and this reappearance, which occurs in the form of gigantic, hypertrophied forms and in the grotesque doubling through nose and phallus, "exposes" both the body and official culture. The carnival exposes and ridicules the individual body's morbidity.

Because it always acts out one and the same story, the carnival drama, which has the body as its scenario, is outside of history. Bakhtin conceives it as a never-ending drama of the human species whose main (double) agent is pregnant death/dead pregnancy. The figure of pregnant death, which is no longer allegory but rather the syllogism of a grotesque argumentation employing the rhetorical figure of oxymoron, is at the same time a stage instruction for the dramatic corporeal act of protruding, penetrating, expelling, dismembering, evacuating, swallowing.<sup>51</sup>

Bakhtin's somatic semiotics describes not only the exchange relationship between body and world, but also the border traffic between inside and out, between I and we, between identity and alterity. It is the description of a process that culminates in ecstasy—an ecstasy, however, that does not refer to the soul leaving the body (which would mean the end of all exchange) but rather the egression of the body's inside into the outside world, that spilling out into the world which is captured in the phrase "to laugh your guts out." The same movement is expressed by Bataille's concept of *mise à nu*:

Stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. (*Death and Sensuality*, 12)

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51. Compare Goethe's description of a man dressed as a pregnant woman who during the Roman carnival gives birth to a "deformed figure" [*unförmliche Gestalt*]. See in particular the chapters "Nebenstraßen," in *Das römische Karneval*, which contains the description of this grotesque birth.

In a context apart from that of his carnival theory Bakhtin introduces the concept of “being-outside-of-oneself” [*вне-находимость*], of ecstasy as “exotopy,”<sup>52</sup> as the eccentricity of the I. This exotopic-ecstatic-eccentric state refers to the transgression of boundaries performed by the I as it moves out into the world and towards the other in order to arrive at itself: “I must find myself in another by finding another in myself” (*Dostoevsky*, 287). As Rainer Grübel puts it, “in the contrary movement involved in usurping the other and the world in the I, the I for Bakhtin becomes conscious of itself precisely in its state of “being-outside-of-itself,” precisely through its relation to the other.”<sup>53</sup> The drama of the body repeated in the carnival also repeats this exotopy, this eccentricity of the self.

Bakhtin’s description of the exchange relationship is a central aspect of his carnival project that he created out of and in his analysis of Rabelais’s novel. The tension between ideological and cultural typology approaches manifests itself in the tension between Bakhtin’s utopian project and his description of the cultural morphemes which have congealed through constant repetition—i.e. his grammar of these forms. In this way, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* becomes readable as a carnival utopia and as a carnival grammar.

**Translated by Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis**

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52. Todorov suggests this word as a translation of Bakhtin’s concept, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, 99ff.

53. Grübel, “Vorwort,” Bakhtin, *Ästhetik des Wortes*, 68. The hermeneutic dimension of “exotopy” has been treated by Hans-Robert Jauss in “Zum Problem des dialogischen verstehens,” in *Dialogizität*, 11-24.