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THE THEATER OF THE MASK: BEN JOHNSON'S STAGE, NEW-AGE CARNIVALS AND THE WORLD ANONYMOUS

<http://samaramon.co/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Carnivals.rar> VIDEO on Macedonian carnivals

Abstract

To what extent a cartoon *portrait* masks the *real Identity*, or projects its hidden entity, its revolt or rejoicing, pity or pleasure, anger or elation, is the question that leads to another, Shakespearean question: to be or not to be the real identity behind the intended message. To what extent the messenger, the identity behind the mask represents its "reality" is a question that post-postmodern relativists never had a consensus on, due to their relativist and revised ethics and aesthetics in determining the *matter of the mask*. Michail Bakhtin's search for parallels between Bolshevik function of masked socio-political identities and the archetypal function of masks in re-initiation of the human-centered celebration of secularism (existing in Medieval and Renaissance carnivals and masks) is the topic of this scientific-artistic review.

Michail Bakhtin's study of Renaissance and Medieval culture of the mask is becoming revisited by many academic and pop-culture *explorers* in our purportedly post-religious and post-historic, neo-pagan, new-age *retro* interest in messages from the past. Bakhtin and his Circle of Jewish and atheist Russian intellectuals during Stalin's communist era, explored the archetypal, mythological, classical, and (anti)Christian features of the mask, in order to extract parallels of the human nature in a mass-driven culture of Russian communism, fashioned to function as a carnival parody, a grotesque imitation of freedom and human rights. Bakhtin identified the common mask expression 1. toward imposed social pressure and 2. toward its own instincts to rebel against pressure. He confirmed the existing concept that mass expressions date back from antiquities to his time of observation, and that masks are means and tools of disguised, guarded, yet liberated, as well as unguarded, yet possibly organized reaction to the act-ion of certain chronology and pedology (chronotopy, as Bakhtin refers to it, in novel discourse). (Bakhtin, 1981; Hirschkop, 1999)

Bakhtin's studies of the carnevalesque and the mask resulted into extrapolated fundamental functions of the innate instincts and intentions of the mask. His findings reveal the archetypal aspects of staged and pretended identity of the

mask, its already engendered comic and tragic nature. He confirms the nature of the mask as corresponding to a lasting relationship of the form of a *pretended face* that *acts up* an actualization of its concealed substance, as he relates it to the Stalinist regime and the free-thinkers persecutions, such as Bakhtin's Kazakhstan exile.

The actual state of the actor who wears the acting mask, has been identified by Bakhtin as the agent with hidden revolt and revolution in his intellectual, emotional, psychological and social urges against established order, the Russian state that he saw as a staged utopian illusion, a failed state that seemingly organized and orchestrated its people's masses. Today's interpretations of the mask accept the common understanding that Renaissance and Medieval masks are not dead, that they revive across the world-as-a-theater.

From a 21st century perspective the mask is the contemporary agent intended to retain and maintain its lasting common messages:

- diffuse the need for *change* (and maybe not as temporary as in the past, during mass festivities, carnivals and varieties of gatherings
- refuse to be subjected to suppressive dictatorship of ecclesiastical or feudal authorities, and
- demonstrate their own, self-liberated, and liberating, authority over themselves.

Non-Christian, secular, atheist, modern and post-postmodern *cultures* exercise freedom to mock and disqualify power-figures, a tendency shared with the Renaissance and Medieval ridiculing of the earthly and the heavenly Lord. For them even Christ's resurrection is a mask, a falsified event of a non-existing act; a play that does not play out at all with their anti-absolute *creed*. Some academic interpreters during Stalin's international stages of "freedom", give credence to yet another system of values (or anti-values) of the mask as a liberator. In this enterprise they use the mobility of the mask to identify with symbols and substances of animalistic, cannibalistic, atavistic, carnivorous multitudes of neo-pagan gods, spreading fast throughout the 20th-21st century. Such symbolism of the mask is already being presented in today's carnival performances, and parades of new-age, new-pagan, "retro", Gothic, bewildered spiritualistic dimension and creatures, as categorized in the folk heritage of the world. (Arne-Thompson, 2002)

Christian culture on the other side of the reality and fantasy equation, still keeps defending its approach, despite increased intolerance and discrimination against its moral and aesthetic value systems and their increased irrelevance for the *new world order* educational and cultural transformation agendas. Christian ethics response is that the entity of God has never been a masque, neither in literature, nor in fresco arts and paintings, or popular, street pageantry of Medieval morality and mystery plays.

In the history of cultures, authors from Aristotle and Aristophanes to Aesop, Ben Johnson, Shakespeare, Lafontaine and George Orwell, formatted the human identity behind animal masks. A question in cultural and social psychology is imposed regarding the animal mask décor over the human entity. Therefore: 1. has the human being constantly feared negative social, and later political repercussions, or 2. is it the ever present, but hidden, liberating but intimidating base instincts that induce wearing animal masks (in addition to other mask functions: to amuse or abuse the human being, the stakeholder of pain, or pleasure in the societal, and personal world of *animals*? (see stereotypes of animal masks on video link: Macedonain carnaval culture in Strumica and Vevcani)

Critics among secular and Christian researchers are divided on the *chameleonic* issue of the mask. Christian critics refuse Bakhtin's promotion of the early secular, anti-ecclesiastical and anti-establishment order. Christian wisdom finds the Renaissance man-centered, not God-centered celebration of life, as neo-Gnostic, heretic, esoteric feast of materiality of the human flesh on the market of liberated insults against divine and earthly order. Freedom, according to Christian ethics, comes from getting rid of chaos and disorder (enacted in Renaissance carnivals) and from the shortcomings of the physical instincts of the body, and not inviting it, or violently asking for its carnalities channeled through the carnivals.

Non-Christian, secular intellectuals like Bakhtin, generally subscribe to the mask, the masquerade, the carnevalesque and the carnal feasting as

- a) radical liberating *agents that facilitate progressive mind/body change*, renewal, destruction of the old, reconstruction of the world
or they consider the mask as a
- b) non-risky, protective domain for the human mind/body sanity, since they represent "beliefs" that man, not god, controls freedom, freedom even to the extent of oblivion for reality and truth, freedom to revolt to the extent of self-destruction or deprivation of the sense of order, order within their inner or outer scene, platform, social stratum for perception or projection, where masked actors boldly tend, or at least pretend to be more powerful in changing the world, and its reality and truth (as representational Verism in the operas for the masses, Pagliacci and Cavalleria Rusticana).

Bakhtin's studies of the masks also affirm another feature of the masked, concealed nature: masks served as safety and security tools in arenas of political, social, or private conflicts (Pagliacci), just as masks were self-designed as psychological and material tools to prepare a human character against, or for the chaos (Hamlet). Hamlet's psychological and mental mask was used for a protected, corrective, preemptive plan to strike, to revenge injustice, crime and social or moral disorder.

John Milton's symbolic stereotype of Satan as a serpent, is an elemental mask of an intellectual and cosmic punishment against a crime committed in the perfect universe inhabited with human imperfections. This Christian genius reminds

mankind of their Paradise lost due to criminal activity of the corrupt human body and mind. Unlike Bakhtin, Milton believes in perpetual consequences for mankind's fallacies when freedom explodes against its "own good". In such extremes freedom could only pretend to enjoy its right to *liberty and pursuit of happiness*, later designed as one of the new world enticing idea(l)s inserted in the founding creed of America. (Brandist, 2002)

S. Dali's Surrealism, or Garcia Marques Magic Realism are yet another globally recognizable and celebrated masks, sold on the grand scale of artistic markets of freedom. Both of these 20th c. grand figures perform *exclusive* masking with their artistic media, masking the mankind's loss of reality for what is sustainable what not, what is permissive or acceptable - what is not, what is beautiful as good (esthetics as ethics) what is beautiful as ugly and violent to the sense and sensibility on the other side of secularism. Criticism against Western culture of indulgence and hedonism could no longer protect the integrity of the human soul. Another kind of criticism, coming from religious and racial hatred, could no longer be stopped with any legal protection of the international community as a stage, since cultural divisions wear severely antagonized masks.

After the Renaissance affection with pre-Christian aesthetics and ethics, New Age P(again)ism is *again* putting in action the once antiquated anachronism of the mask (sanctioned during Stalin's dictatorship). Neo-pagan paraphernalia as a part of anti-Christian costumes, acquires new-old properties of masks of Demons presented as new-age Saints in the secular parade of freedom from religion with a twist, which leads to freedom to worship any entity, force, fiction, fantasy or falsified facts.

When the movie media lauched the sci-fi jargon "*May the force be with you*" in the post-postmodern lexicon of Hollywood, it actually meant "*May the force (of freedom) be enforced up/on, against, or with you*", as a neo-pagan blessing, or a curse, depending on the theist or atheist interpretation! (Stam, 1989)

The least Romantic atheist Percy Shelley might be ecstatic today to find himself among his a-romantic atheists who might be feasting and singing: *May your God keep dying, may Man-made gods keep reviving, gods that we create, cloned from our own genius-mimicking genes!*

New Spiritualists, in a parallel to old Gothic, occult-bound, monster-masks, establish Academies of Magic, and *sell* atavistic masks, straight in the century of virtual scientific knowledge, which is another brand of masks for alternative realities.

Is 21st century progress regressing into Voltaire and Diderot's enlightened darkening of God, it remains for the relativistic philosophers of the post-religious age to take their individual academic stand. God is dead, Long live the SpirIT of the IT, of the Information Technology that will teach mankind to enlightened IN-tuition of how to pay for entering the age and the stage of propagated media. There, the new man

will be protected from cynically rejected Goodness, as the new-age entertainment carnal “carnival” proclaim it false ethical value. Goodness becomes outdated under the mask of new ethics, goodness is put on laser Guillotine for its interference in the culture systems, goodness that dares threaten Evil, the devil (D-Evil), and goodness that is being surpassed by hyper-(D)Evil constructs. These are some of the new-age post- postmodern vows for de(con)struction among the culture warriors. (Boer, 2007)

From Bahktin’s point of view masks could be *agents of change* against the identity thefts among the Cavalliers, (the ones “on horses”, the *haves* against the *have nots*) who symbolize superior forces, false elitism. In the same analogy, masks could be the rustic, rust-ified, rugged, inferior “foot-walkers”, foot-soldiers, protagonists of the masses, those perpetually manipulated crowds in the process of entertaining themselves with *panem et circense*.

From an information-technology point of view, masks could refer to the virtual reality cloud, or the bridnets - stealing the brids (the kids) being hidden, stolen from their parents, deceived, received by the higher power of the non-human, non-god, non-entity being of anti-matter, designed for exchange of the good old human soul. In the mask domain, whatever mimics reality, it re-presents its antithesis, and resents its sustainable reality. One can recognize masks in social networks, as they work for the industry, the factories that produce earthly Black Holes in socialization.

Charity wwwebs could also be seen as masks, mimicking human(itarian) nature and selling the image of moral materialism .i.e. utilitarianism, with an Orwellian massage: “*All humanitarian Aid Masques are Equally Good, but Some Charity chAIRs Are Equally More CorrUPt*”. (Hirschkop, 1999)

Human (organ) trafficking entities could also be perceived as deceptive masks, although some of them retain the image of saving lives. Such masks receive both *organs* and gold (*ore*) and *guns* at the same time, as they act as dominant gods in the carnal carnival market of monstrous masquerades in latest history.

The IT trendy IN-formation masks could be seen as equal to DIS-information ones, and vice versa: DIS-information could IN-form the form of the mask. Just like two centuries ago, when William Wordsworth got a de-masking information about the misinforming French revolution (1789) and its a-roma(n)tic Paris Commune(ism), aromatized with blood and gun-powder. De-masking its ideals he gave up false revolutionary ideals of the enlightenment revolution masked as *equal freedom among brothers*. Unmasking the false philosophies, Wordsworth returned to England, to new lyrical ballads for the soul, and the sanity. (Brandist, 2002)

George Orwell, a century later, unmasked Communism as an innate un-sustainability, knowing that its future morphs will one day re-form and revolutionize re-assembled embodiments of world order(s), both among ur-Ban *cavalleria* where freedom is banned in the name of safety, and among counTRYmenAGERIA) where masses are managed under neo-communist, social-internationalism, or new national-

socialism, or under glowing balls of celebrated *glow-ball-ism*, fired up for a definite success-ism of ideals.

J. Derrida masked MarXism with another failure, Deconstructivism, which revealed his own masks under masks, fighting against the order of the old *icons* in language, in meaning and in human common-sense understanding. He created new masks of de-icon-ism, imposed them in the main-stream academia and feasted on becoming a new Deacon-structivist in the Church of A-Theism, trying to *add-ucate* both elitist pro-fes-seria (cultured Cavalleria) and agri-Cultural worker-ia). Note: Neologisms used in this text have been devised as an artistic approach to the mask interpretation discourse – the author of this paragraph on language. (Bostand, 2004)

Again, for some theorists - religion is against revised, relativized mask of post-human deceptive (in)difference between educated clowns and non-educated fools, from Renaissance processions and from today's processes - to "foolization" of the population.

For some, even Easter is a mask - of Christian faith, masking festivities for someone else, for Ishtar, the Eastern Star that hides behind pre-Christian history of Western culture, as seen by Bakhtin's philosophy and psychology of the carnivals.

Masks are the pagliacci men, the humans invented them to protect themselves from being caught, while acting as masters of deception. Pagliacci men, the "who?"-men, invented human-faced masks to also vent themselves from guilt and shame, throughout the parades of history, from Stone Rage to Brids Age.

Pagliacci of the age of "Humanism" became very potent as masks of self-*divinism*, self-made gurus, bards, semi-humans, semi-animals, semi-engines, semi-gods, semi-demo(n)cratic writers of the newly re-visited old Ark of anti-scripts (in post-literate) societies.

Fashion make-up pagliacci masks are in vogue today – many of them to mask the natural environmental, i.e. *enVirus*-mental faces of silicon veiled beauty, and to produce B.U.Tee shirts made of tattooed skin.

Masks can successfully mask sex and gender ID-entities, from the G-lobe Theater of Shakespearian time, to the global *plat-forms* of today.

Masks seem to make the *ideology of equality* as easy as a botox injection.

Masks could also be *hide-parks* for face-less fools, or soul-less facefuls, or soul-ful faces of the ever present, ancient and current marionettes.

If all is just perceived as a mask(ing) facade, how could justice of real substance and content be served in a democracy!? Or maybe all is but a mask hiding behind False-staff Joke(r)s. What would Mr. Bakhtin say about today's masks, if able to cross time and matter that might be masking *infinity*? Could students fully produce portrayals of masks in a PhD dissertation, or a global forum presentation?

Do not be afraid, not everything is a mask. If you are called a deserter - giving up the task of identifying a mask - be resolute, have another kind of joy escaping from someone else's masks, deserting from another desert, a wasteland of arid brains full of empty theories on ultra-radical *dance macabre* with liberal Phantoms of the Opera.

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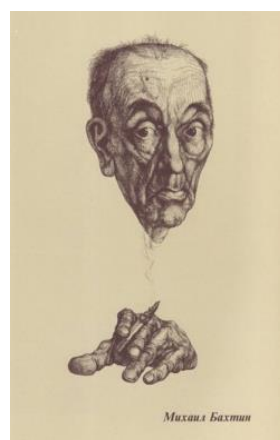
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Michail Bachtin, lithography by Yuri Seliverstov