

The Dialectics of Carnival: From Bakhtin to
Baudrillard

Dan Krier and William Swart

Alienation and the Carnivalization of Society

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and Lauren Langman**

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
JEROME BRAUN	

PART I

Alienation in Modern Mass Society: Its Consequences in Producing Post-Modernity That Is Increasingly Similar to Pre-Modernity

1 The Rise of the Nazis as an Example of Sadistic Carnival	3
JEROME BRAUN	
2 Democracy and the Dilemmas of Nation-Building	19
JEROME BRAUN	
3 The Gap between the Ideal and the Real in Politics: A Comparative Perspective	28
JEROME BRAUN	
4 The Increasing Similarities between Post-Modernity and Pre-Modernity	32
JEROME BRAUN	

PART II

The Carnivalization of Society

5 Alienation, Entrapment, and Inauthenticity: Carnival to the Rescue	53
LAUREN LANGMAN	

viii *Contents*

6	Carnivalization and Freedom: A Shortcut to the Overcoming of Alienation	76
	KATHLEEN PACYNA	
7	Theorizing Carnival: Mardi Gras as Perceived, Conceived, and Lived Space	93
	KEVIN FOX GOTHAM	
8	Authoritarianism and Carnivalization in the 2008 Presidential Election and the Return of Right-Wing Populism	119
	GEORGE N. LUNDSKOW	
9	The Dialectics of Carnival: From Bakhtin to Baudrillard	133
	DAN KRIER AND WILLIAM J. SWART	

PART III

Conclusion

Conclusion	169
SHLOMO SHOHAM	
<i>Contributors</i>	171
<i>Bibliography</i>	173
<i>Index</i>	191

Figures

9.1	Peter Paul Ruben's <i>Village Fete</i> (1690).	139
9.2	<i>Die Bombe</i> 1899 (January 22).	152
9.3	<i>Wiener Caricaturen</i> 1881 (February 17).	153
9.4	<i>Wiener Caricaturen</i> 1891 (January 11).	154
9.5	<i>Ulk</i> 1926.	156

absolute right and wrong inherently bestows the ability to decide who is a real person and who isn't, who benefits and who suffers, who lives—and who dies.

With such Manichean views of power driven by personal insecurity, identifying the enemy often advances to punishing the enemy. As society becomes increasingly uncertain, the individual experiences greater vicissitudes, and embraces carnivalization more fervently, and not just in mind and emotions, but in action. The Tea Party is only the beginning, and ironically, its popularity depends not on winning elections but on losing them. The more the evil side wins, the more authoritarianism and carnivalization will intensify. For the self-proclaimed patriots of the right, justice derives from their imagination of how they wish the world to be, not how it actually is.

p. 133 - 145

9 The Dialectics of Carnival From Bakhtin to Baudrillard

Dan Krier and William J. Swart

Mikhail Bakhtin's literary analysis of French author François Rabelais is often considered a paradigm shift in medieval literary theory. A Russian historian, literary scholar, and cultural theorist, Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* recovered Rabelais's writings from obscurity by interpreting them in the context of medieval carnival—those Saturnalian folk festivals that celebrated the inversion of the normative standards and social hierarchies of everyday medieval life. As a result, Bakhtin not only rescued Rabelais from the misunderstanding of literary critics, but also provided an extremely cogent analysis of the carnivalesque and its central importance to medieval social life.

In the process of resituating the work of Rabelais, Bakhtin custom-built his own conceptual vocabulary of medieval social life. This conceptualization, although widely incorporated into cultural studies, drew very little from historically parallel sociological theories of medieval life and has had only a limited impact on the field of sociology. Interestingly, many of Bakhtin's most important concepts, such as "general and reduced laughter," or "first and second life," align very closely with sociological theories of traditional society, especially the classic works of Emile Durkheim: *Division of Labor in Society* (1933) and *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1915]). We find that Bakhtin's concepts powerfully integrate with sociological theories. This integration simultaneously strengthens both Bakhtin's analysis of medieval carnival and sociological analyses of traditional society and provides a theoretical foundation to trace the historical transformation of the carnivalesque in modernity and post-modernity.

Our analysis is divided into two parts. We begin with an overview of the modalities of medieval carnival as put forward in Bakhtin's writings on Rabelais (1965) and Dostoyevsky (1973). According to Bakhtin, the overriding principle or modality of the carnivalesque "second life" during the medieval period is *travesty*, the content of which is an inverted *mirror* of everyday "first-life" culture and social structure. The relationship between the first and second life is *dialogic*, a term that has been recognized as Bakhtin's most enduring theoretical contribution to cultural studies, referring to mutually supporting alterations between these mirror-image phases of culture. Our sociological reading of Bakhtin emphasizes that the carnivalesque occurred within a medieval economy without modern market

relations. This world, still unified by a collective consciousness and without a thoroughgoing division of labor, was capable of active, universal *participation* in carnivalesque, which Bakhtin conceptualizes as *general laughter*. Incorporating the work of Emile Durkheim, we move toward a sociological theory of the dialogic. While undertheorized by Durkheim, we argue that the carnivalesque mode of the collective consciousness was a crucial dialogical mechanism for the development and maintenance of mechanical solidarity in pre-modern cultural systems.

The second part of this chapter extrapolates from Bakhtin to explore how changes in the first life—specifically, the rise of industrial and postindustrial capitalism—reconstructed the carnivalesque second life with new organizing principles and cultural forms. Moving into modernity, the carnivalesque transforms from travesty into *spectacle*. The content of the spectacular second life no longer fully mirrors everyday—first life experience, but shrinks into a *distraction* from it. As it does, the relationship between first- and second-life experience loses its dialogic quality. While the medieval carnivalesque was a crucial mechanism supporting the reproduction of an unchanging, coherent culture, the modern spectacle *dialectically* negates a modern culture that is itself contradictory and incoherent. The spectacular second life occurs within *modern economic relationships*, whose complex division of labor, class antagonism, and gender divisions erodes both collective consciousness and its universal, carnivalesque mode, general laughter. Just as Durkheim theorized the emergence of organic solidarity to characterize modernity's subcultural specialization, Bakhtin's concept of *reduced laughter* designates the differentiated, specialized consciousness and social relations of the modern first life. While the medieval carnivalesque featured universal, active participation with the spirit of generalized laughter, the

modern spectacle features specialized performances before passive, spectator audiences with the spirit of reduced laughter.

The post-modern era marks another radical shift in the central modality of the carnivalesque: from spectacle to simulation. While the modern spectacle was a distraction from alienated first life, the post-modern second life is a simulated *projection* of a first life that no longer exists. Much like Baudrillard argues that Disneyland masks the post-modern reality that all life experiences mirror an amusement park, the post-modern carnival exists as a mechanism to *mask* both the erosion of the authentic first life and the fact that both first and second life are carnivalesque. The features of the *post-modern economy*, especially its global scale, speculative nature, and total commodification of everyday life, simultaneously disintegrates real social bonds in actually existing human communities and replaces them with illusory, commodified mechanisms for social solidarity (Facebook “friends” or the “community” of Harley-Davidson enthusiasts). These “hyper-real” (Baudrillard 1983a) social connections and cultural forms create a user's delusion that social relationships and communities exist, effectively replacing social interaction with *collective interpassivity* (Žižek 2007).

Thus the journey of the carnivalesque from its origins in travesty that mirrors all-too-real traditional social relations, through spectacles that distract from alienated modern society, arrives in the bleak, socially impoverished post-modern world as simulation that projects to atomized individuals an illusion that shared heritage, culture, and meaning exist at all.

THE MEDIEVAL CARNIVAL: MECHANICAL SOLIDARITY AND UNIVERSAL SPIRIT

Table 9.1 The Modalities of the Carnivalesque

Medieval	Modern	Post-Modern
Travesty	Spectacle	Simulation
Mirror	Distraction	Projection
Dialogic [Travesty Supports Social Life]	Dialectic [Spectacle Negates Social Life]	Delusion [Simulation Projects the Illusion of Social Life]
Premodern Market [Barter/Trade]	Industrial Capitalism [Class/Gender Distinctions]	Global/Speculative Capitalism [Total Commodification of Everyday Life]
“General Laughter” [Universal Consciousness/Culture]	“Reduced Laughter” [Subcultural Specialization in Consciousness/Culture]	Hyper-Reality [Simulation of shared consciousness/Culture where none exists]
Mechanical Solidarity	Organic Solidarity	Collective Interpassivity

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a *universal spirit*; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants (Bakhtin 1968, 7).

In our reading of primary and secondary sources on Bakhtin, it is clear that Bakhtin's foray into social theory was subordinated to and directed by his central project of literary criticism. Bakhtin did not intend to analyze carnival and the carnivalesque as a “dependent variable” but rather as an “independent variable” that would help him explain what he really cared about, the literary productions of Rabelais and Dostoevsky.

Bakhtin's citations of social theory are few.¹ It seems likely that Bakhtin was familiar with leading social theorists² but found that their conceptual categories and theoretical framings failed to appreciate the *dialogic* quality

of medieval social life. While Durkheim and other sober social theorists had developed an appreciation for ritual, their models posited a unipolar collective consciousness with a single focal totem at the center of mechanical solidarity. Rabelais's obscene, grotesque imagery and transgressive prose could not be meaningfully located within this one-dimensional model of the collective consciousness. To Bakhtin, collective consciousness of traditional societies dynamically moved through unending, rotary phase shifts between serious/official life and unserious/carnival life. Bakhtin positioned Rabelais's writings in the lower arc of the bipolar phase shift that constituted medieval culture. In explaining Rabelais's writings, Bakhtin rediscovered the lost significance of the medieval cultural underlife: the carnivalesque in all of its forms. In this sense, Bakhtin wrote a groundbreaking piece of social theory almost by accident, as a detour along the main road of literary criticism.

BAKHTIN AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

Bakhtin unified a diverse complex of traits under the concept of carnival: crowning/ discrowning of carnival kings, the widespread use of disguise, masks, and costumes that were either sexually charged or grotesquely distorted, an emphasis upon lower-body organs and drives, the staging of "bloodless carnival wars," verbal-abuse contests, cursing matches, and potlatch-style gift exchanges (1973, 103). In the section that follows, we briefly outline Bakhtin's most central, anchoring characteristics of medieval carnival as depicted in Table 9.2.

For Bakhtin, a key characteristic of the medieval carnival was its inversion of the normative standards and social hierarchies of everyday life. This "wrong way 'round" inversion of the official, ecclesiastical strictures of medieval life produced a "second world" or "second life" (1968, 5–6). Key to this inversion was the notion of *travesty*; literally a burlesque (ludicrous

Table 9.2 The Modality of Medieval Carnival

Travesty	"disguised so as to be ridiculous/burlesque; a burlesque translation or imitation; grotesquely incongruous in style, treatment."
Mirror	Carnival = a travestied "second life" that inverts yet supports official life
Dialogic	"Phase shifting" without negation or synthetic resolution
Premodern Market	"Language of the Marketplace is the language of Carnavalesque" = Billingsgate
"General Laughter"	Universal Consciousness/Culture
Mechanical Solidarity	Carnavalesque à Durkheimian Collective Consciousness

or ridiculous) imitation of social life. Bakhtin was careful to distinguish carnivalesque travesty from one-sided insults, put-downs, or mockery that was directed by one group within society against another. Instead, travesty was an inversion or laughing mirror image of the culture and social structure taken as a whole: no group or individual was abused personally but historically as the entire society was upended in burlesque.

Travesty was characterized by high levels of *profanation*: "carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole carnivalistic system of lowering of status and bringing down to earth . . . carnivalistic obscenities connected with the reproductive power of the earth and the body" (1973, 101). Carnival provided a travestied mirroring of social life by inverting social hierarchies (kings became peasants; peasants became kings), unleashing restrained sexual conduct, and mocking the seriousness of everyday life. Key to profanation in the carnivalesque was the notion of "debasement"—literally an association with the "lower stratum of the body" (1968, 21). Carnival emphasized debased "grotesque realism," whose imagery fluidly integrated the anatomy and activity of reproduction and excretion. These debasing images were not viewed with abhorrence in medieval life, but rather perceived with "ambivalence" (in the sense of being creatively destructive).

Such debasing gestures and expressions are ambivalent, since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum. Therefore, in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, and welfare. This positive element was still fully alive and clearly realized in the time of Rabelais (1968, 148).

Debasement as a linguistic form was widely understood and accepted in medieval society, and to Bakhtin, the very source of the medieval acceptance of grotesque realism was the dialogic association between destruction and regeneration of the debased region.³ Travestied conduct also involved high levels of *eccentricity*, interaction styles that were out of joint or out of character with the roles and habits of first-world life. This conduct was liberating to individuals, in that it permitted "the latent sides of human nature to be revealed and developed in a concretely sensuous form" (1973, 101). Freud's influence upon Bakhtin was obvious here, as lower body desires, emotional release, and frivolity that were denied expression in everyday life were precisely those desires, emotions, and frivolities that were characteristic of the carnivalesque. However, unlike Freud, these regions of life were not repressed into the unconscious but were consciously and culturally accommodated in the space and time of carnival.

Another of Bakhtin's anchoring concepts was *general laughter*, carnival's universal spirit encouraging participation across all everyday social boundaries. Everyone, regardless of his or her positions in economic, political, age, or gender stratification systems, experienced carnival. Medieval

carnival “does not know footlights” (1968, 6); footlights would turn carnival into a theatrical performance by a limited cast of active players performing before a larger, passive audience. Carnival had no spectators: “All were considered equal during carnival . . . a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (Bakhtin 1968, 10).

The universality of carnival was symbolized by its geographic fluidity and its domination of public spaces. The “carnival square” or town square was the central “scene” of carnival, a public space of generalized milling and social mixing. While carnival often spilled into private domains and spaces, “carnival belongs to the whole people, it is universal, everyone must take part in its familiar contact” (Bakhtin 1973, 105–106). Bakhtin defined the active, generalized mixing in carnival as a “pageant without a stage” that eliminated the boundaries separating audiences from performers. This is in strong contrast to modern spectacles that decisively redivided participants into spectators and audience (see below).

The universal spirit of carnival was evident in Peter Paul Rubens’s 1690 painting *Village Fête* (see Figure 9.1). The artist’s representation of a Flemish farm fair clearly depicted universal participation in carnivalesque activity. Mothers nursed children alongside drinking and bantering men and amorous dancing couples. There were no spectators; while forms of participation may differ, Rubens depicted no “alienation from interaction” (Goffman 1961, 1974), no removal from the prevailing frame of action. The range of activities depicted was quite diverse: Participants were seen breastfeeding, engaging in sexual play, dancing, frolicking, drinking, or conversing. These actions represented diffuse involvements within the single, unitary, celebratory occasion rather than separate activity systems psychologically or physically bounded from the carnivalesque spirit. Rubens’s image depicted more than narrowly sexual coupling behavior, but broad polymorphous perversity that was full-bodied, full-blooded, and multisensual (not just pleasures of the flesh, but music, food, wine). This image was consistent with Bakhtin’s portrait of carnival participants’ total involvement in the flowing events, their consciousness completely responsive to the open-ended second life.

As Rubens’s image illustrated, carnival paradoxically constrained individuals into mandatory, but freely directed participation in liberatory festivities. Medieval carnival bound all social categories and classes with a universal spirit and a formal posture of equality. Goffmanesque social division into performance teams and audience was prohibited as Durkheimian joint participation in ritual experience reigned. Bakhtin used several concepts to capture this quality of carnival. One concept, *familiarity*, referred to the suspension of “distance between people” under the reign of “free, familiar contact among people” (1973, 101).

The universal character of medieval carnival is further developed through Bakhtin’s use of the concept *mésalliances*—literally an unsuitable marriage



Figure 9.1 Peter Paul Rubens's *Village Fête* (1690). Image from Fuchs 1909.

to someone of lower social status. Carnival *mésalliances* sliced medieval society to the bone, cutting across social statuses and dissimilarities while providing the opportunity for an “unfettered familiar attitude” to emerge between differing social ranks. “All the things that were closed off, isolated and separated from one another by the non-carnivalistic hierarchical attitude entered into carnivalistic contacts and combinations” (1973, 101). Rubens depicted infants alongside the elderly, aristocrats alongside peasants; a polymorphous group freed from normal repressions and controlled, first-life segregation and co-experiencing unfettered, embodied pleasure.

A third concept from Bakhtin, *heteroglossia*, referred to the polyphony of voices and subject positions that were co-present, separated, yet united within carnival. Discourse and symbolic exchange within the carnival assumed the form of heteroglossia: many voices, language styles, interaction modes, and meanings coexisted without higher unification or synthesis. The diversity within carnival “brings together, unites, weds and combines [even] the sacred with the profane” (1973, 101).

Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival stresses that the laughing, travestied second life *mirrored* the serious, first life. Many of the features of the carnivalesque—especially its unifying spirit that meaningfully enveloped the entire community—were predicated upon the existence of a cohesive and meaningfully ordered first life. In Durkheimian terms, the mechanical solidarity and robust collective consciousness that characterized the carnivalesque was a mirror image, albeit a distorted one, of the solidarity and consciousness of everyday life. These two phases of life—the serious and the un-serious—were in fact doubles, intimately related to each other, while remaining distinctive and separate. In this sense:

The medieval man lived, as it were, two lives, one, the official, monolithically serious and gloomy life, subject to a strict hierarchical order, filled with fear, dogmatism, reverence and piety, and the other, the life of the carnival square, free, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of all that was holy, disparagement and obscenity, and familiar contact with everyone and everything. Both of these lives were legal and legitimate, but were divided by strict temporal limits (Bakhtin 1973, 106–107).

It is important to bear in mind that the mirror image produced by travestied carnival did not negate or synthetically merge with everyday life but stood forever apart from it. As Bakhtin noted, “Bare negation is alien to folk culture” (1968, 11). The “laws, prohibitions and restrictions . . . [as well as] forms of fear, awe, piety, etiquette” that were associated with normal hierarchical life were temporarily *suspended* during carnival; they were not permanently overcome or canceled (1973, 101).

Bakhtin characterized the mutually supporting alterations between the first and second life as a *dialogic* (dialogue-like) process.⁴ The dynamism

of traditional societies was structured by this cyclical, bipolar, phase shift between mirror-image modes of culture. The upper phase of late medieval European culture was the mode of serious, stratified, sober, gloomy everyday life, while the lower phase was the mode of travestied, laughing carnival. Bakhtin’s dialogic, bipolar theory of medieval culture enabled him to properly situate Rabelais’s archetypal carnivalesque writings in this travestied lower arc.

In explaining Rabelais’s writings, Bakhtin rediscovered the lost significance of the medieval cultural underlife, the carnivalesque in all of its forms. Carnival replenished the first world by providing a revitalizing release from the “social rut” and the repressive controls of everyday social life (1973, 106). The second life was not a mere unproductive respite from productive first-life routines, but was itself profoundly *re-productive*, in part because it allowed all-too-human needs and desires (sexualized, liminal, libidized) that were out of sync with first-life culture to be expressed and realized, thus enabling the ongoing viability of the entire social order. The *dialogic* phase shifting between the first and second life was structurally necessary to the ongoing viability of medieval society. Carnival replenished society through these cycles of birth and death: “to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (1968, 21).

Toward a Sociological Theory of the Dialogic

Bakhtin’s terms *carnivalesque* and *dialogic* have found their way from cultural studies into sociology but have not been thoroughly integrated with sociological theory. Bakhtin himself, even in the two major studies that made his reputation, did not write as a sociologist; Weberian ideal types and Durkheimian structural models were beyond the scope of Bakhtin’s project. As such, the diverse concepts that Bakhtin deployed in his descriptions of the carnivalesque were *asserted* rather than precisely theorized. At the same time, Bakhtin’s work identified characteristics of pre-modern life that were left undertheorized by established sociological theorists, especially Emile Durkheim. In what follows, we specify a *sociological* theory of carnival. Doing so fills a gap in both the Bakhtin literature and Durkheimian sociological theory, and, more importantly, allows us to effectively trace the transformations of the medieval carnivalesque into modern spectacle and post-modern simulation.

The resonance of Bakhtin’s ideas, even without close sociological specificity, has led them to be adopted by scholars studying surprisingly diverse topics. However, these diverse appropriations have often been mutually incompatible. Some scholars use Bakhtin’s work to support the argument that carnivalesque activity allowed lower orders to engage in oppositional struggle and dissident challenges to the status quo (known as the *subversion* thesis; see Eco 1984; Justice 1994), while others use Bakhtin’s work to support the notion that the carnivalesque was a profoundly powerful

source of elite social control (known as the *safety-valve* or *containment* thesis; see Brandist and Tihanov 2000; Camille 1992; Humphrey 2001). We ultimately locate Bakhtin's dialogic theory of the carnivalesque closest to the safety-valve thesis, where scholars like Camille claim that carnival was "licensed" by first-life authorities so that

inversion, cross-dressing, riotous drinking and parodic performance at carnival time . . . was a carefully controlled valve for letting off steam . . . what looks at first like unfettered freedom of expression often served to legitimate the status quo, chastising the weaker groups in the social order. . . . We have to face up to carnival's complicity with the official order, played out in the supposed subversion of it (Camille 1992, 143).

However, an exclusive focus upon carnival as safety-valve is too narrow and precludes a multidimensional, sociological specification of the dialogical relationship between the first and second life. Carnival was a necessary regenerative process in the cycle of medieval life. To Bakhtin, "the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning" (1968, 71). General laughter, as a universally experienced travesty of the first life, provided a dialogic support system that replenished the first life. Thus, carnival did not merely provide relief from the rigid strictures of medieval life; moments of carnival restored social energies, dialogically regenerating the possibility for the first life to continue forward. Eco, following Freud, further developed this point when he argued that carnival represented a case of *contradictio in adjecto* or "happy double binding—capable of curing instead of producing psychosis" (1986, 6).

Evidence for the regenerative nature of the carnivalesque can be seen in its general ubiquity in medieval social life. The medieval calendar was punctuated with widespread carnivals, festivals, and feasts that together constituted a significant percentage of medieval cultural life. European cities in the late Middle Ages "lived a full carnival life for three months of the year (and sometimes more)" (Bakhtin 1973, 106–107). A carnivalesque atmosphere pervaded not only official carnivals, but also sporadic fairs and public gatherings, such as the sixty days of festivities surrounding the four annual fairs in Lyon (Bakhtin 1968, 154). Other scholars have highlighted the immense amount of time that late medieval workers spent in "second-life" activities. E. P. Thompson (1967), for instance, found that late medieval workweeks featured "long weekends" that began on Saturdays, consumed Sundays, spilled over into riotous Saint Mondays and culminated in unproductive, hungover Tuesdays. "First-life" work was largely confined to Wednesdays through Saturdays, with escalating intensity before the return of another long weekend (Thompson 1967). The pervasiveness of the carnivalesque in medieval social life is a further indication of the important role it played in supporting first-life activities.

But while the two sides of medieval life remained distinct, they did not cancel each other out or combine into a blended synthesis. Instead, they were in dialogue with each other, coexisting side by side while taking alternating turns animating the action of medieval society (Holquist 1990, 20). While carnival lived, its forms—travesty, general laughter, *mésalliances* and the rest—abounded, only to disappear entirely upon the first chill rays of sober dawn marking the return of official, workaday life. Other medieval scholars have also noted this peculiar but nearly absolute separation of official seriousness and carnivalesque travesty. Camille (1992), for example, found that medieval sacred texts were often illuminated with profoundly subversive, travestied and comedic images (fornicating couples, bird-headed Christs, Madonnas suckling monkeys, bowling games with feces, nuns picking penises from trees), but carnivalesque images did not intermix with serious ones. They were relegated to the margins where they remained segregated from the sacred words and images in the center of the page.

To Bakhtin, the full truth of medieval society could only be understood as a *dialogue* between official and carnival life. Like someone overhearing only one side of a telephone conversation, a scholar who studies only the serious, official world will misunderstand much of medieval society. As carnival disintegrated in Europe after the Renaissance, scholars increasingly lost the carnivalesque ear needed to hear its laughter in medieval culture. As a result, they lost the ability to appreciate Rabelais's writings, whose debasing imagery and billingsgate language became ever more mystifying as the years passed. Rabelais's laughing travesty struck Voltaire as the incoherent work of a drunken buffoon: "We are annoyed that a man who had so much wit should have made such wretched use of it (Bakhtin 1968, 117). John Calvin rebukes Rabelais in a 1555 sermon, translated into Elizabethan English in 1583:

[Rabelais] casteth forth lewd scoffes against the holy scripture, as doeth that divelish fellowe which is called Pantagruell, and all his filthie and ribauldly writings: and this sort of men pretende not to set up any newe Religion, as thought they were deluded by their owne follish imaginations: but like madde dogges they belke out their filthinesse against the majestie of God, and their meaning is to overthrowe all religion: and should such be spared? (quoted in Prescott 1998, 81).

Calvin's followers strictly suppressed carnivalesque feasting and frivolity. New England Puritans condemned all feast days and holy days, including the celebration of Easter and Christmas (Fischer 1989). The Puritan Cromwellian Parliament in England similarly banned Christmas observances in 1644 (*Catholic Encyclopedia* 1917).⁵ The Roman Church during and after the austere Counter-Reformation joined in the suppression of carnival. For example, in 1748 Pope Benedict XIV instituted an ascetic "Forty Hours' Devotion" during the last days of Lent to block carnivalesque frivolities.

Early modern capitalists, seeking to increase production through intensified, routinized labor, implemented strict time-discipline over workers and eliminated carnivalesque feasts and festivals (Thompson 1967). In Eco's (1986) terms, once carnival ceased to be an authorized transgression, it ceased to function as a unified second life.

Classical sociologists also lacked an ear for the carnivalesque, including Durkheim, whose theory of nonmodern society was rooted in a case study of the Australian Arunta, a tribe that appears, in our reading, to lack carnivalesque forms. Additionally, the texts that form the basis of Durkheim's (and Freud's) analysis of primitive peoples were written by people with nineteenth- and twentieth-century British sensibilities—who very likely also lacked an “ear” for the carnivalesque. Scholars of carnival have noted the muted quality of the carnivalesque in the British Isles; the carnivalesque traditions so embedded in medieval European societies were not as prominent in Britain. Humphrey (2001) notes that scholars of British folk life tend to avoid the term *carnival* or *carnivalesque*, using “festive misrule” to refer to folk merrymaking and rebellion. Whether the Arunta lacked a carnivalesque second life or the British anthropologists failed to detect it, Durkheim's primary sources were devoid of carnivalesque forms.

Using a framework that was silent on the dialogic carnivalesque, Durkheim did not make the connection between the carnivalesque and the regeneration of collective consciousness over time. This may also explain his enigmatic treatment of fatalism in his study of suicide (1951). In this study, two opposing pairs of consciousness (egoism and anomie) existed as modern psychic opposites, representing extremes of social isolation and social disorganization. Altruism and fatalism existed as pre-modern psychic opposites, representing extremes of social integration and social organization. Durkheim's theoretical model compelled him to recognize that fatalism and fatalistic suicide should have been widespread in the deterministic systems of nonmodern societies. Yet he left this form of consciousness theoretically undeveloped. Durkheim devoted entire chapters to egoism, anomie, and altruism, but brushed off fatalism with one obscure footnote. Fatalism, says Durkheim,

has so little contemporary importance and examples are so hard to find . . . that it seems useless to dwell upon it. However it might be said to have historical interest. Do not the suicide of slaves, said to be frequent under certain conditions, . . . belong to this type, or all suicides attributable to excessive physical or moral despotism? (1951, 276[fn])

Why were the rigid strictures of mechanical solidarity not a more overtly destructive force in traditional society? Durkheim's description of fatalistic consciousness amidst “excessive regulation,” “oppressive discipline,” and “inflexible rules” (Durkheim 1951, 276[fn]) seems very close to Bakhtin's description of consciousness in the social rut of serious first life. Fatalism

and fatalistic suicide should have been widespread, yet Durkheim provides little explanation for why it was not. Bakhtin helps clarify this unresolved dilemma in Durkheim's theory. To Bakhtin, fatalistic suicide was suppressed by carnival, which provided an *antidote* to fatalism.

Both Durkheim and Bakhtin recognized that traditional societies were characterized by rotary motion (Žižek 1997), a cyclical reproduction of relatively stable culture over time. Bakhtin, more than Durkheim, problematized the source of energy necessary for cultural reproduction within mechanically bonded, traditional societies. Without carnival, medieval people would have lived in a society “monolithically serious and gloomy . . . [with] strict hierarchical order [and] filled with fear, dogmatism, reverence and piety” (Bakhtin 1973, 106–107). Under this “excessive regulation,” their psychic energies would soon be depleted by the sheer weight of fatalism, as Durkheim suggests. Overcoming fatalism with rejuvenating carnival was crucial to cultural reproduction: carnival was “free, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of all that was holy, disparagement and obscenity, and familiar contact with everyone and everything” (1973, 107)—a total release from excessive regulation. Traditional society's ability to reproduce was dependent upon periodic, dialogic carnivalesque release. Carnival was crucial time out of oppressive first life. More than a Sabbath-like day of rest, carnival was an alternate phase of mechanical solidarity that regenerated social energy.

Bakhtin's emphasis on the dialogic phase shift between official and carnival culture captures something important about the way that traditional societies regenerated themselves over time. Bakhtin argues that the dialogic movement into and out of carnival generated social energy. Just as alternating current is generated by the movement of a coil through the two distinct polarities of a magnetic field, traditional societies reproduced their energy by moving through two distinct phases of collective consciousness. Bakhtin recognized that carnival displaced and desecrated the official collective consciousness and installed a carnivalesque collective consciousness in its place. For the duration of the carnivalesque cultural phase, mechanical solidarity was sustained by this travesty of everyday collective consciousness.

Durkheim's unipolar theory of collective consciousness missed the significance of this dialogic carnivalesque phase to the ongoing maintenance of mechanical solidarity. It is the periodic phase shifting between the two worlds that is crucial to the regeneration of the carnivalesque. Eco (1984) correctly argued that a permanent carnival would be at least as stifling and oppressive as permanent official life. The liberation from fatalism and the generation of reproductive energy occurs during these “moments” of transition between the two worlds. Durkheim leaves untheorized this alternating phase shift in and out of everyday life and the carnivalesque, and instead posits unipolar totemic collective consciousness as the mainstay of traditional social life.

Durkheimian fatalism was profoundly overcome through the frequent, lived experience of shifting in to and out of carnivalesque phases of the collective consciousness. Carnival's phase shift in the collective consciousness released and replenished emotional energy through the lived experience or "pathos of vicissitudes and changes, of death and renewal" (Bakhtin 1973, 102). Carnival was a "festival of all-destroying and all-renewing time" that allowed participants to experience "jolly relativity of every system and order, every authority" (Bakhtin 1973, 102). The future of a person in a carnival culture was not "pitilessly blocked" nor were their "passions violently choked" (Durkheim 1951, 276). Because of the second life, the first life, no matter how excessively regulated or oppressive, was never fated to become a Weberian iron cage of unceasing disciplinary power and behavioral regulation. Fatalism was reduced by carnival laughter, which degraded and mocked the highest earthly and spiritual authority, thereby renewing them (Bakhtin 1973, 104).

The ambivalent laughter of carnival possessed enormous creative, genre-forming power. This laughter could seize both poles of evolution within a phenomenon in their continuous, creative, renewing changeability: death is foreseen in birth and birth in death, defeat in victory and victory in defeat, discrowning in coronation, etc. Carnival laughter does not allow any one of these elements of change to be absolutized or grow stiff and cold in one-sided seriousness (Bakhtin 1973, 137).

Another strong contrast between Durkheim and Bakhtin was found in their divergent view of *markets*. For Durkheim, markets *disrupted* collective consciousness and destroyed mechanical solidarity; for Bakhtin, markets *incubated* carnivalesque forms of collective consciousness and *generated* mechanical solidarity. In Durkheim, mechanical solidarity and collective consciousness were rooted in traditional production of goods for local use rather than for market exchange and distant trade. Markets eroded mechanical solidarity because they generated occupational specialization (division of labor): They did not bring people together but divided them up. Bakhtin took the opposite view, especially in his book on Rabelais: The language of the carnivalesque is the "language of the marketplace" (1968, 145–195). Though little discussed in the secondary literature on Bakhtin, he identified markets as a crucial source of late medieval carnivalesque imagery and language. Bakhtin used a now-archaic phrase, *billingsgate abuse*, to connote ribald, profane, and invective forms of speech and behavior. Billingsgate Market in London was the location of a medieval wharf and fish exchange notorious for particularly obscene and abusive discursive forms used by fishmongers and market traders. Marketplaces like Billingsgate were a perpetual carnivalesque space of travesty in which official, first-world morality—especially displays of deference, demeanor, courtesy, and civility—was suspended.

Billingsgate abuse functions as an equalizer of social status to facilitate exchange by degrading high-status people and bringing them down to the common ground of market haggling, banter, and bargaining. Markets brought hierarchically separated people together and billingsgate abuse placed them on the common footing of trade (Bakhtin 1968, 15–17). Markets were also the first-life refuge of carnivalesque forms—a kind of warehouse for the carnivalesque during the reign of official life. Thus, in contrast to Durkheim, markets did not erode collective consciousness but were fundamentally and permanently infused with the carnivalesque phase of collective consciousness. They served as the official world's incubator and storage facility for carnivalesque forms.

Durkheim attributed the disintegration of mechanical solidarity to the spread of markets, but Bakhtin attributed the disintegration of medieval carnival to capitalism's traumatic fragmentation and modernization of culture. His works avoided direct sociological analysis of this process, but nevertheless traced the inflection of this process in the increasingly critical reception of Rabelais. Bakhtin charted the historical shrinkage of carnival's warm, full-blooded "general laughter" (a lived mirth that engulfed an entire mechanically bonded society) into cold and biting "reduced laughter" (specialized, sarcastic, satirical, scapegoating). Calculating modern culture was no longer capable of dialogue with carnival forms and could not meaningfully "live" in carnivalesque travesty. Moderns seemed especially repulsed by carnivalesque imagery of the grotesque body. Rabelais's writings, which featured breasts, buttocks, genitalia, sexual acts, and defecation on almost every page, were criticized as unabashedly vulgar, obscene, filthy, and valueless. Bakhtin described leading bourgeois thinkers, Protestant reformers, and early-modern moralists as *agelast*: "not laughing," humorless, or mirthless. Rabelais's critics' shrunken capacity to laugh at carnivalesque forms signaled their inability to comprehend the mechanically bonded traditional society that it helped sustain.

To summarize our integration of Durkheim and Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is an important yet often unrecognized phase of the pre-modern collective consciousness. Mechanical solidarity was sustained and even intensified by the "general laughter," universal participation, and *mésalliances* that predominated during carnival. We argue that carnival provided a crucial antidote to the fatalistic tendencies of tightly bonded mechanical societies, providing liberatory release from the workaday cares, feudal hierarchies, and moral rigors of everyday medieval life. Like an electrical generator, the alternating movement of the entire society in to and out of travestied phases of collective consciousness produced social energy. As such, the carnivalesque was far more than a "subversion" of feudal authority structures or a "safety valve" to the rigors of everyday medieval life. Instead, it was a regenerative cycle that allowed the very foundations of traditional social life to reproduce through history.

CARNIVALESQUE MODALITIES IN MODERN AND POST-MODERN SOCIETY

The problem of carnival (in the sense of the totality of all the various festivals, rituals and forms of a carnival type), its essence, its roots deep in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under the conditions of class society, its extraordinary vitality and undying fascination is one of the most complex and interesting problems of cultural history (Bakhtin 1973, 100).

Our sociologically thickened reading of Bakhtin distilled the central modality of carnival in traditional society. Carnival was a travestied second life that mirrored the mechanically bonded first life. The two phases of the collective consciousness (the official and the carnivalesque) were in dialogue with each other, remaining distinct while mutually supporting and regenerating the energies of traditional social life. The carnivalesque occurred within a medieval economic system infused with billingsgate markets that were themselves embedded in traditional economic production supportive of mechanical bonding. Mechanical solidarity was produced through cyclical shifts within the two-in-one collective consciousness of the first and second life. Universal participation and general laughter in the carnivalesque phase provided the necessary social energies for the stability and maintenance of traditional social life.

In this section, we trace alterations in the modalities of carnival that occurred as the late medieval European world of the Renaissance was dissolved by advancing industrial capitalism. Our sociological reading of Bakhtin allows us to discern how changes in the first, official life caused the cultural reconstruction of the carnivalesque second life. We begin with the *modern* capitalist economy and the transformation of the carnivalesque second life into the consumption of products and leisure time in the society of the *spectacle* (Debord 1967). We then examine how the *post-modern* economy (neoliberal, global, post-Fordist) reconstructs the spectacle into *simulations* of carnivalesque forms and experience (Baughdrillard 1984).

Modern Carnival: From Travesty to Spectacle

Bakhtin analyzed the successive breakdown of carnival from its Renaissance peak (1973, 107). Bakhtin's explanation for this decline, especially in his book on Dostoevsky, followed arguments made by historical-materialist literary critics in the early twentieth century, who viewed Dostoevsky's writings as "a pure and genuine expression of the 'spirit of capitalism'" (1973, 15). By shattering the social vacuums isolating traditional societies from one another and from encroaching modernity,

capitalism eliminated the mechanical solidarity and collective consciousness necessary for carnival. Capitalism's rapid urbanization and cultural diversity contributed to the impossibility of carnival in modern society. As traditional status hierarchies were flattened, differences between bourgeoisie and proletariat were too fluid and unstable to be inverted in the carnivalesque travesty (1973, 137). Further, the detailed division of labor and occupational specialization required for production in the capitalist economy generated a fragmented first life that was too fractured to be mirrored in carnival forms.

This loss of mechanical solidarity made traditional carnival impossible. Capitalism's smashing of communities and collective bonds left behind a "disorganized dust of individuals" (Fromm 1955) fragmented by class hierarchies and isolated by religious schism. Carnival's dialogic and rejuvenating "pregnant death" was nowhere to be found in capitalism. Instead, a new form of dialectical "creative destruction" (Schumpeter 1975) emerged with features more akin to carnivalesque spectacle (Debord 1967) than traditional carnival.

We find that Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle best captures the shifting modality of the carnivalesque from traditional to modern societies. Best and Kellner (1997) argue that Debord's concept of spectacle is difficult to pin down, but generally

refers to a media and consumer society, organized around the consumption of images, commodities . . . [as well as] the vast institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary capitalism . . . which subject individuals to societal manipulation, while obscuring the nature and effects of capitalism and its deprivations (1997, 84).

Table 9.3 From Medieval Carnival to Modern Spectacle

Travesty → Spectacle	Carnival has no stable/universal culture to mirror: replaced by diverse, specialized spectacle
Mirror → Distraction	Carnivalesque incapable of second life mirroring of fragmented modernity and becomes a split-off escape
Dialogic → Dialectic	Carnivalesque becomes spectacle under specializing heterogeneous forces of modernity: dialectical movement
Premodern Market → Industrial Capitalism	Carnivalesque spectacle suspends market culture, industrial production; reflects class and gender stratification
"General Laughter" → Reduced Laughter	Fragmentation of "universal spirit" into heteroglossia of incommensurate, simultaneous specialized spirits
Mechanical → Organic Solidarity	Rise of division of labor/personal difference/social heterogeneity, Durkheim's "dust of individuals" Subcultural Specialization in Consciousness/Culture

In this sense, spectacle is not life—not even a “second-life”—but a flickering series of representations that distract people from life. Unlike Bakhtin, who equated carnival with travesty, Debord viewed spectacle as the opposite, even the antithesis, of travesty. Debord’s spectacle did not overturn the “official order,” even temporarily; instead, it referenced the permanent, perpetual cultural forms that became the official world’s strongest ideological and cultural support. Modern people do not vibrantly “live in” spectacle as a second life, but are momentarily stupefied by spectacular consumption.

According to Eco, travesty can only occur when the everyday rules that are suspended and upended in carnival are embedded deep within the collective consciousness of a community. Social rules, hierarchical orders, authority relationships all must be “presupposed and taken for granted” in order for their transgression to produce general laughter (Eco 1984, 6).

The deep embeddedness of the collective consciousness was precisely what capitalism destroyed. Modern people were profoundly alienated from each other in a society grown too large, fragmented, and fluid to authentically connect. Because the official first life was no longer sufficiently consistent and integrated to be travestied, the carnivalesque second life became impossible.

Within this anomic world of Durkheimian organic solidarity, isolated individuals came to increasingly rely on spectacle to create “a social relation among people, mediated by [projected] images” (Debord 1967, #4). As work and other sober “first-life” activities ceased to integrate society, the projected images of spectacle provided substitute forms of communication and indirect relationships through leisure and consumption. Thus, “as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment,” the spectacle emerged as the “model of socially dominant life” (Debord, 1967, #6). Since carnival could no longer travesty first-life experiences that had been fragmented by the forces of industrial capitalism, travesty was replaced by spectacle, which provided the illusion of a unified first life while deepening social fragmentation and isolation.

The erosion of collective consciousness, community, and participatory living in the society of the spectacle replaced travestied mirroring with “spectacular distraction.” Medieval carnival had served an inverted version of a meaningful society back to its members. The spectacle, on the other hand, transported the consciousness of spectators away from their first world entirely. Television, advertising, conspicuous consumption, and leisure could not “mirror” the first life of work and production, but blocked spectators’ conscious acknowledgment of the empty hole at the center of their social world. Once begun, spectacle re-created its own preconditions. The more people became immersed in the society of the spectacle, the less time was available for genuine, participatory living. As individuals cathected strongly with their cars, homes, clothing, entertainments, and other regions of consumption, they progressively disconnected from one another (Debord 1967, #28).

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation (Debord 1967, #1).

While the essence of carnival was active living, the essence of spectacle was passivity. The enthusiastic, uproarious living of medieval carnival rejuvenated participants while regenerating the world. The spectacle, on the other hand, depended upon and simultaneously produced a kind of extreme social and psychological isolation of individuals. It provided an illusion of social life while in fact enforcing deep estrangement of self from other.

Whereas carnival regenerated the first world, the spectacle exhausted it. The carnivalesque spectacle could not maintain the dialogic, phase-shifting relationship between the first and second lives that was so crucial to the regeneration of medieval social life in Bakhtin’s theory. Official life and carnival were in dialogue but remained bounded, so that the lived experience of each life did not blend or intermix with the other. As time-out-of-life (what Debord calls “pseudo-cyclical time”), the carnivalesque spectacle was a “*visible negation of life*” (Debord 1967, #10). The two lives of modern society, the productive and the spectacular, did not cycle through bounded, separate cultural phases, but rather coexisted alongside and inside of each other in a dialectical, negating relationship.

When the tide of medieval carnival crested and the king of carnival was dethroned, the carnivalesque spirit receded to the fringe of official first life: the medieval market. Like a storage battery, the pre-modern market kept the energy of carnival alive during the “ordinary time” of the first life. But under industrial capitalism, markets move from the fringe to the center of modern economic life. As the critical location where value was “realized” in economic exchange, modern markets lost their carnivalesque “second-life” character: They no longer served as the incubator of carnival forms but became the archetype of modern, serious, and calculating first life. The modern spectacle, like medieval carnival, continued to stimulate trade and consumption. The carnivalesque was purged from increasingly serious haggling, but became attached to spectacles of branding, advertising, consumer marketing, entertainment, tourism, and other leisure activities. Debord refers to these spectacles as “vulgarized pseudo-festivals” whose primary function is to “incite a surplus of economic expenditure” (1967, 154). The modern market no longer sustains the spirit of carnival, but warehouses and displays the depleted husks of carnivalesque forms to stimulate consumer spending.

Bakhtin refers to the remnants of the carnivalesque forms that survive the death of carnival as “reduced laughter.” He characterized reduced laughter as laughter “muted down to a minimum: it is as if we see laughter’s footprints in the structure of represented reality, but do not hear laughter itself” (1973, 137). Carnivalesque spectacles evidence reduced laughter in

at least two ways. First, the erosion of mechanical solidarity meant that carnivalesque laughter could only be partial, limited to certain strata or subgroups. In medieval carnival, participants laughed *with* each other in universal spirit. In carnivalesque spectacles, women might laugh *at* men (or vice versa), elites *at* the poor (or vice versa), city dwellers at their country cousins (or vice versa) but no one laughs together. Second, as the capitalist division of labor eroded the unified culture of traditional societies, carnivalesque spectacles could only project anomic, fragmented, and contradictory imagery split-off from the totality of human experience.



Figure 9.2 *Die Bombe* 1899 (January 22).

By the end of the nineteenth century, carnival had become a spectacle performed by specialists who paraded before passive spectators “consuming” leisure. This distinction between spectators and performers is clearly evident in Figure 9.2, which depicts carnival in Vienna circa 1899. Here, a woman attired in a revealing carnival costume dances with abandon before what appears to be an entire gallery of transfixed men, who are not only immobile but also fully dressed in “first-life” dinner jackets, ties, and top hats. The differentiation between active carnival performers and passive spectators is even more pronounced in Figure 9.3, an image depicting Viennese Carnival in 1881. The men in this image, again immobile and clad in military uniforms or formal dinner attire, do not just ogle the carnivalesque woman; they minutely survey her with opera glasses. The “reduced laughter” observed in these images is representative of most late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century illustrations of European carnival that we have located.

One important dimension of reduced laughter that was highly visible in images of modern spectacular carnival was gender. Women were consistently portrayed as active participants, performing ritualized displays that travestied *fin de siècle* bourgeois gender roles. Often depicted in the throes of enjoyment, women were still capable of “living in” carnival with dialogic laughter. Men, on the other hand, appear to have lost the capacity to live a second life. They maintained the dress, demeanor, and subjectivities from



Figure 9.3 *Wiener Caricaturen* 1881 (February 17).

their official first life. While women burlesque the constrictions of their everyday sphere, displaying their unbuttoned carnival selves with abandon, men seem confined to passivity as voyeuristic spectators. Men maintain their structured positions and sober identities, often without allowing a single button to slip. Bakhtin's analysis of reduced laughter does not focus on gender, but these images are consistent with his theory (and with Durkheim's).



Figure 9.4 Wiener Caricaturen 1891 (January 11).

Through most of modernity, bourgeois men's lives "modernized" with a division of labor, occupational specialization, and individualized subjectivity earlier than bourgeois women's lives, which were restricted to the confining sphere of domesticity, marriage, and motherhood. Such women could "live" in carnival far later than men because carnival was capable of laughing travestying of women's not-yet-modern first lives. Men had dropped out of the capability of full enjoyment and participation in general laughter: Carnival was reduced to a spectator sport.

Gender contributed to reduced laughter in another way: Men were not only spectators to women's activity but also became the target of carnival mockery and forms of billingsgate abuse. Many images of modern spectacular carnival depict women laughing *at* men but not *with* them. Figure 9.4 is one example in which four energetic young women surround a sleeping older man to taunt and humiliate him. One young woman delicately balances upon a sofa while dancing a jig, toasting champagne, and removing the man's top hat with her stiletto-like shoe. Far from eliminating status differences in universal familiarity, the abundance of such mildly sadomasochistic imagery signals that the modern spectacular carnival reinforced the social distance and hierarchical distinctions that medieval carnival (temporarily) suspended.

Another important, if less visible, dimension of reduced laughter was social class. The *mésalliances* between high and low strata, so much a feature of medieval carnival, had disappeared by the late nineteenth century. The social distance separating upper and lower classes in the first life was maintained in carnivalesque spectacles: Each class had a carnival of its own. Receding from the public square, spectacular carnival flowed into privatized, class-stratified spaces. This was one reason why social class, unlike gender, was conspicuous by its absence from carnival representations. Most of the images depicted exclusive gatherings of homogenous, primarily bourgeois, people who related to each other with a degree of carnival familiarity as privileged equals. Spectacular carnival took place within refined and fashionable venues: ballrooms, opera-house foyers, exclusive clubs, and banquet halls. The expense and exclusivity of these elegant lifestyle enclaves removed carnival from the "public square," restricting participation to those with financial means and personal connections.

Figure 9.5 is set in Berlin during the 1920s, entitled "Under the Sign of the Herring Barrel" and captioned with the phrase "my pet . . . couldn't you have left your pearls behind in the coat room? Then we would really have freedom to dance." Here, men and women co-participate in festivities more or less equally (spectator men are absent) in a surface appearance of general laughter. Men frolic in festive costume; women frolic even more in the festive *absence* of costume. However, the eight-piece orchestra, high-ceilinged ornate ballroom, staffed coatroom, obviously expensive costuming, and pearls upon every woman whose body remains unmarked by the rigors and calories of working-class life clearly depict reduced laughter

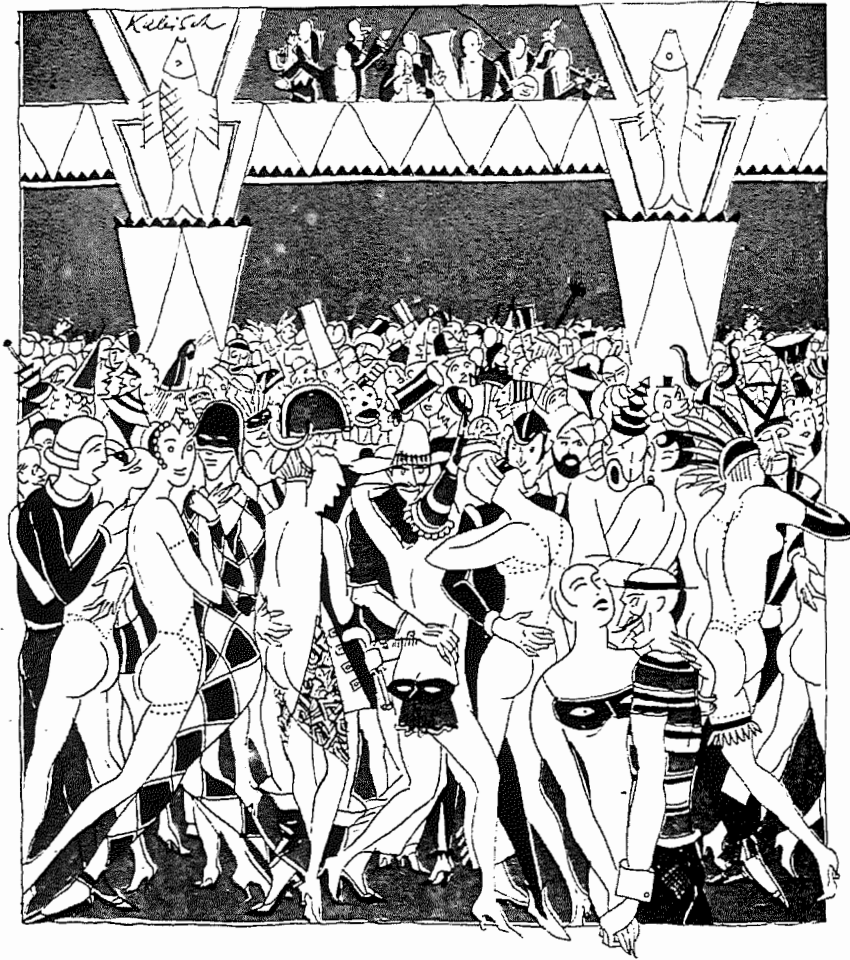


Figure 9.5 Ulk 1926.

and the erosion of *mésalliance* in the carnivalesque spectacle. Like a movie comedian clad only in a barrel, the activities of these participants in the modern carnivalesque spectacle are “covered” by the “herring barrel” of a festooned hall that guarantees social-class exclusivity. The precondition of the depicted activity—full of such overt transgressive body display, high levels of sensuality, and *universal* enjoyment—was the *exclusion of the “other.”* The frame surrounding these refined partiers, defining the specific rules of their mutual transgression, would collapse should the crasser sort of partier mix in with them. This risqué carnivalesque spectacle with such exclusive participants would have been impossible in the public square that was the normal venue for traditional carnival.

Nineteenth-century bourgeois carnival was an exclusive, class-stratified, and stylized ritual segregated from working classes. By barring lower orders at the door of the ballroom, the upper orders excluded the possibility that their official position and high-status lifestyles would be mocked or travestied by the riffraff below. *Mésalliances* made medieval carnival’s general laughter safe (and mandatory) for elite participation in travesty. Class segregation made carnivalesque spectacle’s reduced laughter safe (and comfortable) for elite participation in risqué transgression. Class segregation also made carnivalesque spectacle possible for the lower orders as well. Degradation of an excluded “other” appears in images of working-class people who mock the manners and parody the appearance of elites. Since these elites have first-life authority over them, reduced laughter cannot be generated without their exclusion from working-class carnivalesque spectacles.

In medieval carnival, the volume of general laughter was turned up to its highest settings. In the carnivalesque spectacle, the volume of reduced laughter is muted. The correspondence between Bakhtin’s muted, reduced laughter and Debord’s distracting but forgettable spectacle is obvious. In both theories, modern carnivalesque spectacles lack the strong and concentrated emotional energy that flowed through the collective consciousness of unified traditional society. The transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity dissipated passions and encouraged calculating reason. Modernity’s distribution of people into diverse social locations, specialized occupations, and mutually incompatible subjectivities disrupted the emotional energy needed to produce the high volume of authentic carnival.

Durkheim’s theory of capitalism’s reconstruction of consciousness and Weber’s theory of the development of the sober, calculating “spirit of capitalism” align with Bakhtin’s writings in interesting and as yet unexplored ways. Bakhtin’s work (especially his book on Dostoevsky) draws our attention to the need to augment the sociological story of the loss of mechanical solidarity, collective consciousness, traditional economic ethics, and cultural “enchantment” with an account of the *war on carnival* that occurred contemporaneously with these other movements (Bakhtin 1973). Bakhtin reveals just how central carnivalesque activity and subjectivity were to European peoples on the cusp of industrialization. Bakhtin’s writings suggest that carnivalesque culture declined not only because of structural change, but also because of suppression on multiple fronts. Political, religious, and economic elites each had a stake in the suppression, reduction, or redirection of the carnivalesque.

In conclusion, modernity’s alienated production, detailed division of labor, and deep egoism could no longer be a source of solidarity, collective consciousness, or the travestied mirroring of social life so prevalent in pre-modern societies. As capitalism reconstructed European society, traditional culture’s periodic, dialogic oscillation out of official life and into carnival ceased. Capitalism’s emerging “one-dimensional” culture—serious, sober, production-oriented—preserved fragments of old carnivalesque forms not

as an organized, separate, unserious phase of life but rather as a dialectical aspect of serious life itself. Following Debord (1967), we contrast traditional carnival's active participation to capitalism's *carnavalesque spectacle* that demands behavioral passivity and spectatorship. Central to "leisure" and consumer culture, carnivalesque spectacles did not generate or reinforce social solidarity and authentic collective consciousness. Instead, they distracted already-alienated workers from conscious awareness while further isolating them from each other as spectators. The carnivalesque spectacle dialectically promoted high levels of consumption and profit but cut spectators off from participation in the rejuvenating energies of authentic, (re)productive carnival life. Alienated at work and at leisure, denied carnival's refreshing sea change, spectators treaded water in the perpetual pool of capitalism.

The Post-Modern Turn: From Spectacle to Simulation

In the same way that Marx & Engel's *Communist Manifesto* was forever linked to the 1848 revolutions, Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle* was strongly linked to the May 1968 revolutionary moment in France. Debord's Situationist International had promoted carnivalesque activity as revolutionary practice. These practices included travesty-like *detournement* of popular culture against itself, drifting through urban spaces and public squares, the creation of "situations" that disrupted official life, generated *mésalliances*, and allowed for the emergence of playful moments of community. Crucially, the general strike and mass revolts of May '68 prominently featured just such Bakhtinian carnivalesque activities: the travesty of official life, especially the "discrowning" of De Gaulle, the *mésalliance* of workers and students, billingsgate abuse as revolutionary rhetoric, sexual license, public milling, and merrymaking. Prior to the May 1968 revolts, scholars and activists tended to view revolution and resistance as serious, violent forms of collective action. May '68 demonstrated how genuine protest activity could connect "laughing crowds" with revolutionary resistance in "carnavalesque" activity and community. This carnivalesque activity is widely held in the popular discourse of contemporary antiglobalization and anticonsumerist social movements (see, e.g., Klein 2000, the Situationist International Web site www.notbored.org, or culture-jamming as practiced in the chic, *detournement* journals and Web site Adbusters).

The revolutionary moment of 1968 passed quickly. In the intervening forty years, capitalist official life, including the pacifying, alienating "spectacle," grew geographically to incorporate the entire globe and intensified to colonize every last region of human life, from food preparation to sexual intimacy. Debord's early writings celebrated the potential for "carnavalesque" travesty of corporate culture as a mechanism of effective resistance and revolution. But over time, he was forced to recognize that capitalism had learned to "negate the negation" by hijacking the carnivalesque (Debord

1988). This new "integrated spectacle," witnessed in the "mainstreaming" of anticapitalist hip-hop culture or in the retooling of "revolution" to sell conservative political philosophies, or pickup trucks, negated countercultural social movements by reducing them to profit motive.

Debord's later writings anticipate the pessimistic and dystopian insights of his contemporary Jean Baudrillard, whose writings recognized that the proliferation of advertising, media, and other virtual realities had altered the sign system of late capitalism and rendered all social life a *simulation* (Baudrillard 1983a). Distinct and discernible difference between the authentic and the counterfeit, between originals and copies, collapsed as the integrated spectacle absorbed authentic social life. In this ubiquitous "carnivalization of the world" (Langman 2005), the modality of the carnivalesque shifted from spectacle to simulation. We view the explosion of carnival forms in recent years as something that can only be understood as capitalist-powered simulations of an authentic life that no longer exists. Music festivals, Mardi Gras, Burning Man, motorcycle rallies, stock-car racing, and other mass events no longer function merely as spectacular forms of leisure and consumption but as *carnavalesque simulations* that create the appearance of authentic social life.⁶

From this perspective, the carnivalesque simulation no longer provides spectacular distraction from the alienation and anomie of social life but rather projects the appearance of a first life that has now totally disappeared. Baudrillard (1983a) points to the characteristics of *carnavalesque simulations* in his discussion of Disneyland and Watergate. Just as Watergate was a simulation designed to convince Americans that "politics as usual" operate within the law, or Disneyland is a simulation that masks the

Table 9.4 From Modern Spectacle to Post-Modern Simulation

Spectacle → Simulation	Carnavalesque becomes simulated travesty of a universal culture that no longer exists
Distraction → Projection	Simulation projects the illusion of second life that masks the absence of the social
Dialectic → Delusion	Carnavalesque simulations camouflage the anomie of late modernity with the illusion that community and shared experience are still possible
Industrial Capitalism → Global/Speculative Capitalism	Intensive commodification of everyday life and pervasive alienation
Reduced Laughter → Hyper-Reality	Simulation of shared consciousness/culture where none exists
Organic Solidarity → Collective Interpassivity	Collective spectatorship generates simulation of community, freedom, equality and abundance

“fantasy” of ordinary social life, the post-modern carnivalesque props up modern life by camouflaging the simulated nature of everyday life. While carnivalesque simulations go beyond spectatorship to involve the participants in some limited way, their action serves as a user’s illusion where atomized individuals without any shared heritage, culture, meaning, or ties simulate a shared experience that masks the ongoing erosion of the social in the post-modern experience.

Central to the theories of both Bakhtin and Debord was an emphasis on the division of society into two separate spheres. To Bakhtin, carnival dialogically supported official life; to Debord, consumer spectacles dialectically negated productive work life. In contrast, Baudrillard’s writings emphasized the erosion or breakdown of all boundaries separating different social spheres. In post-modern society, carnivalesque simulations cannot be distinguished in any meaningful way from authentic first life. Unlike the traditional and modern modes of the carnivalesque that were temporally separated from the “rest” of life, the post-modern carnivalesque is perpetual. One no longer rotates in and out of the carnivalesque sphere but permanently dwells within it. The perpetual carnivalistic simulations of post-modern society approximate Eco’s (1984, 6) “diabolic world.” Everlasting carnival sustains the delusion that an obdurate, authentic, and noncarnivalesque realm of social life exists while promoting equally repressive and authoritarian social experiences as the “first world” they supposedly replace.

We see a similar shift in the economic characteristics of carnivalesque simulations. Whereas Bakhtin equated traditional carnivalesque forms with the pre-modern market and Debord equated spectacle with modern marketing and consumption of leisure, we draw from Baudrillard (1983a; 1983b) and Jameson (1991) to argue that all of post-modern society—including carnivalesque simulations—are thoroughly penetrated with the language and logic of capitalist markets. The omnipresence of advertising, branding, and marketing, the rise of the entertainment and tourism industries, the centrality of consumer services, and the global mobility of industrial production has broken down the distinction between production and consumption in late capitalism. Whereas Bakhtin argued that official life was fully separated from carnival and Debord argued that productive work life was separated from leisure and consumer spectacles, no region of post-modern life escapes the dynamics of speculative capitalism. The logic of the marketplace is never absent from carnivalesque simulations, even though these simulations often suppress or submerge crass concerns over money, payment, price, haggling, and the rest. Carnivalesque simulations, such as amusement parks and all-inclusive vacation resorts, the advanced purchase of holidays, or the deferred payment of restaurant and hotel bills, simulate the suspension of the rules of the market. This creates the false illusion that there is any difference between carnivalesque simulation and the equally carnivalesque world of post-modern consumption.

In addition, carnivalesque simulations unrelentingly infuse every television commercial, shopping mall, and sales pitch. Post-modern people constantly encounter carnivalesque imagery and language not only in their “leisure” life but also in and through their work. Unlike their modern “Fordist” counterparts, post-modern workers produce simulations of carnival rather than durable goods. The post-modern economy is not only composed of workers “cooking each other hamburgers,” as Robert Reich once wrote, but more to the point, of workers producing and selling carnivalesque simulations to each other. An excellent illustration of this is provided by the recent transformation of the historic Old Billingsgate Market in London—the source of Bakhtin’s concept of billingsgate abuse—into an elite, themed event center and exhibit hall. Branded with the patina of down-market fishmongering and abusive haggling, Billingsgate has been transformed into a post-modern simulation of itself, a venue marketed to marketers as a stage for marketing: “from cars to computers, fashion to financial services . . . iTunes to Xelibri, a world *stage* for world class products” (<http://www.oldbillingsgate.co.uk/>).

Finally, the post-modern economy has become increasingly dominated by trading on speculative financial markets (Krier 2005). Stock trading, security speculation, currency swapping, real estate flipping—these speculative activities shade off into gambling, which Bakhtin identifies as the *modern* economy’s most carnivalesque realm (Bakhtin 1973, 143–144). As speculation penetrates all facets of capitalist activity in *post-modern* society, simulated stagings of casino “excitement” proliferate (games shows, HGTV programming, state lotteries, sales incentive events).

To Bakhtin, medieval carnival was a world of general laughter that temporarily suspended social distinctions and promoted a ubiquitous collective consciousness. But as European society modernized, social fragmentation atomized the collective conscience and eroded general laughter into a reduced laughter that restricted the possibility for shared social experiences. The carnivalesque simulation marks the death of laughter altogether. The post-modern loss of cohesive relations and shared meanings buries “the social beneath a simulation of the social” (Baudrillard 1983b, 67), effectively silencing even the possibility of reduced laughter. Unable to discern reality from illusion or authentic experiences from commodified images, shared consciousness is increasingly replaced by “hyper-reality” (Baudrillard 1988): a simulation of shared consciousness and culture where none authentically exists.

The Sturgis Motorcycle Rally provides an interesting example of the erosion of reduced laughter to hyperreality. Initiated in 1938 to promote motorcycle racing and touring, the rally remained a participatory, authentic motorcycle event until the late 1980s. However, the increasing commodification of the rally in the 1980s, driven in part by the rebranding of the Harley Davidson Motorcycle Corporation, fundamentally transformed the rally into a carnivalesque simulation of outlaw biker culture. Participants,

vendors, and revenue grew exponentially between 1990 and 2005. A few authentic motorcycle enthusiasts continue to attend the rally, but the spectator base of the rally increasingly shares little in common with one another save the brand images that unite them. In addition, the rally itself has become branded, its surface image carefully crafted by marketing professionals into a simulation of a shared biker counterculture. Underneath this skin-deep simulation, the rally is merely a platform for marketing a diverse selection of commodities (Swart and Krier 2009).

Our discussion of the modern spectacle described how modernity's division of labor, social density, and cultural fragmentation eroded the Durkheimian mechanical solidarity necessary for medieval carnival. Modern carnivalesque spectacles did not promote organic solidarity (defined as recognition of interdependency and the sacredness of individuality), but deepened the alienation of already-alienated workers. In our view, post-modern carnivalesque simulations do not build either organic or mechanical solidarity but promote *interpassivity* (Žižek 2007).

Interpassivity manifests itself along two fronts. First, while carnivalesque simulations appear to promote higher levels of participation than modern spectacles, it is a pseudoparticipation that is shallow, stylized, and profoundly self-referential. Whether earning beads at Mardi Gras or selecting Miss Buffalo Chip at the Sturgis Rally, participants in these events are often "alone together" while a simulated staging of carnival plays out around them. This points to the second manifestation of interpassivity that mirrors Žižek's (2007) claims about prayer wheels, video recorders, and laugh tracks, all of which complete important tasks automatically, without active participation. The omnipresence of prepackaged, simulated carnivalesque forms enables post-moderns to experience carnival without emotional or psychic involvement. No matter what else we are doing, carnivalesque simulations *enjoy for us*. We participate while remaining disengaged as the carnivalesque forms simulate our general laughter, like the laugh tracks on a sitcom.

As a consequence, collective interpassivity in post-modern simulations can not rejuvenate social energies. In medieval culture, the creative experience of joint participation in authentic carnival was an inwardly sufficient end in itself. Carnival was not staged for or dependent upon the appreciative gaze of an audience but was the expression of an exuberant universal spirit. Post-modern carnivalesque simulations, by contrast, are not ends in themselves. Like jazz music on a CD, they are not lived but played, and serve primarily as a means to enhance profitability.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

While there is a growing literature on the importance of the carnivalesque in traditional, modern, and post-modern societies, a fully theorized sociology of carnival remains largely undeveloped in the field of sociology. Our

sociological reading of Bakhtin attempts to contribute to this vacancy. With Bakhtin, we affirm carnival as an integral component of medieval social life. Building on Bakhtin, we have developed a sociological theory of the dialogic that more specifically theorizes the importance of the carnivalesque to mechanical solidarity and traditional society. Extrapolating from Bakhtin, we have explored the transformation of carnival modalities into the modern and post-modern eras.

Interwoven with the dynamics of capitalism, modern spectacles and post-modern simulations represent severe ruptures in the rejuvenating social power of the traditional carnivals of medieval society. Contemporary carnivalesque simulations offer participants and virtual observers a shallow and momentary experience of solidarity, a surface appearance of shared collective consciousness, and an illusory travesty of official power. In reality, the collective interpassivity of carnivalesque simulations does not approach the radical transgression of social boundaries characteristic of medieval *mésalliances*. The solidly middle-class "Burners" in the Black Rock Desert, "Dale Junior" fans at Talladega, or "Hells Angels Wannabes" at Sturgis only play at *mésalliance*: They safely slum with others of their own class. With the working and lower classes excluded from participation and virtual spectatorship, deep travesty of official power and authority becomes impossible. As Debord's (1988) concept of the integrated spectacle made plain, post-modern carnivalesque simulations cannot travesty political and economic power; they can only legitimate it (even with mild satire and mockery).

Authentic carnival activity was antiofficial and therefore potentially threatening to modern and post-modern power (Eco 1984, 6). Yet the family resemblance between carnivalesque forms and subversive resistance to power, already suspect at the time of Debord, has become even more problematic in these post-modern times. Though carnivalesque forms have been associated historically with revolutionary and resistance movements (the popular mobs of the French Revolution, for instance), contemporary carnivals, fairs, and festivals are much more likely to resemble capitalist billboards than revolutionary placards. Ironically, when carnivalesque forms appear in twenty-first-century protest activity, they are organized around power itself rather than opposed to it.

Carnivalesque simulations of protest have been widespread in recent times. For example, the Tea Party was recognized early in the Obama presidency for its aggressive disruption of "town-hall meetings." These meetings were themselves simulations of authentic New England town-hall meetings (admission was controlled, questions were prescreened, answers were pre-scripted). Hijacked by people loosely affiliated with the Tea Party movement, protesters directed billingsgate abuse at lawmakers, travestied the current administration, scorned potential beneficiaries of the law, and claimed *mésalliance* across a broad spectrum of the population. These actions simulated the appearance of authentic, spontaneous, and expressive

grassroots collective action, yet were actually simulated Astroturf protests, pre-scripted, organized, and coordinated by political operatives. The festive yet disruptive actions surrounding the recount of the disputed 2000 Florida election, where protesters held signs that mocked the stupidity of voters and paraded a joker-like character dubbed "Hanging Chad," are a similar case. Neither of these carnivalesque protests travestied or discrowned official power. Instead, they travestied the idea of protest against official power. In this travesty of travesty, carnivalesque forms were inverted in an effort to uphold power and put down those who would challenge it.

Carnivalesque forms, which began as a rejuvenating phase of medieval life, transformed under the pressures of industrial capitalism into spectacles that distracted alienated workers from the full consciousness of their degraded life. These pressures grew within post-modern political economy, flattening carnival forms into mere simulations incapable of producing social solidarity or liberatory experience. Bakhtin's carnival was a wholly-other life that revitalized individual and social energies depleted in the grinding cycle of serious workaday production. In contrast, carnivalesque simulations are coextensive with the rest of inauthentic, post-modern existence. Medieval carnival lifted the human spirit temporarily out of the rut of official life, something contemporary carnivalesque simulations cannot do, precisely because post-modern society lacks both a stable, well-trodden rut to be lifted out of and a genuine carnival plane to be lifted onto. Without clean separation between first and second life, the very atmosphere of post-modern society is decentralized yet ubiquitous carnivalesque simulation.

NOTES

1. Bakhtin cites Marx at five points in the Rabelais study and Georg Simmel once in the study of Dostoevsky. There are numerous references in both volumes to literary critics immersed in social theory, however.
2. Bakhtin's studies of Rabelais and Dostoevsky incorporate ideas and conceptual framings from social theory even when he does not cite specific authors. His studies of Freud and Marx display broad reading in social thought and sociological theory.
3. Bakhtin's reading of carnival as rooted in the ambiguity of double images such as death/rebirth, decay/growth is very similar to Frazer's emphasis upon the death and burial of the king of carnival (Frazer 1900, 98).
4. Bakhtin's later work, *The Dialogical Imagination* (1981), shifts his focus from historical analysis to literary theory. Building from the sociological overtones in his previous work on Dostoevsky and Rabelais, Bakhtin uses *The Dialogical Imagination* to connect the novel as a specific literary form to the diversity and heteroglossia of modern culture.
5. Modern people have lost even very basic knowledge of the significance of carnivalesque forms in medieval life. Christmas celebrations were highly carnivalesque—Rabelaisian "mumming" (parading in masquerade) was widespread; Christmas Eve was known as Modranicht (Mother's Night), whose festivities included the eating of "cake in honor of Mary's "afterbirth," and much drinking and feasting. At Easter, priests would participate with

congregations in "Easter Laughter" encouraged by sermons that travestied Jesus' life and works. Reversals of authority were common on and about Easter: for example, women gained the right to clout husbands, servants to scold masters.

6. Though Best and Kellner (2001) have fittingly proposed that these massive, multidimensional and semiparticipatory forms constitute a new type of "mega-spectacle," we find greater utility in analyzing these events through the lens provided by Baudrillard (1983; Best and Kellner 1997) and thus refer to them as post-modern carnivalesque simulations.