



THE 7TH EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
**EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
 REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES**

Body and Dress in the Civilisation of Spectacles

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Abstract: In traditionalist societies, as an individual who was an integral part of the cosmos and the community to which he belonged, man would not view his body as a separate entity, as he would become aware of his physical “rooting” in a limited network of correspondences and meanings. The main characteristic of holistic societies was to “emphasize and use social totality” (Dumont, 1983, p. 263) to the detriment of the individual, whose body did not exist as an element of individuality - as it would be the case later on, in modern societies, where individualism was primary and the body was a personalizing factor. In the post-’60s era, a new imagery of the body gained momentum, with a noted acceptance of individualism as a social structure and the embrace of a positive (lay) view upon nature. After that decade, “the Western man discovers that he has a body and this novelty follows its own route, whilst eliciting discourses and practices that carry a mass-media aura” (Dumont, 1983, p. 7). With the help of media representations, we will herein oppose two types of bodies and dress, as they are reflected in some ritualistic carnival festivities nowadays: the Carnival of Venice and the one in Rio de Janeiro; on the other hand, we will see to what extent the “play” component of homo ludens has kept its dimension in the current society.

Keywords: dress; body; carnival; homo ludens; performance

1. Carnival as a Form of Play

As an integral part of man’s life, play has accompanied him throughout the development of civilization. According to Johan Huizinga, “human civilization is born and grows through play and as play” (Huizinga, 2007, p. 35). The need to play has to do with one’s “pleasure to play”, where “play isn’t called for by a physical need and much less by moral duty. It is not a task. It is done during one’s «spare time». It is only secondarily, due to the fact that it becomes a cultural function, that the notions of obligation and duty come to associate with it” (Huizinga, p. 48).

Celebration is a shared joy; therefore, a characteristic of community. “Consecration, sacrifice, sacred dances, sacred contests, representations, religious mysteries – all of them are part of celebration. Even if the rites are bloody and the tests that the contestants are called to upon their initiation are cruel, and even if the masks are scary, the whole takes place as a celebration. One’s «regular life» is suspended. Eating, partying, and all sorts of other extravagances accompany the celebration throughout its duration” (Huizinga, 2007, p. 67).

In an essay titled *Vom Wesen des Fetes* (“On the Nature of Celebration”), Karl Kerényi states that “among the soul-related realities, celebration is an aspect in itself, which cannot be taken for anything else in the world” (*apud* Huizinga, 2007, p. 67). Huizinga concludes that “by the nature of things, the closest correlations exist between celebration and play”. The elimination of regular life; the tone of the action, which is (mostly, but not necessarily) cheerful (since the celebration in itself can be serious); the time and space limitation; the simultaneity of strict determinacy and genuine freedom – all these are the main common traits of play and celebration” (Huizinga, 2007, p. 68).

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Semiotically speaking, “all spectacles are codes – that is, systems of semantic signs and rules of operating with the signs that the spectator himself must own, too, in order to have access to their meaning; in other words, they are language structures” (Ceașu, 2008, p. 106).

As a celebration that is typical of communities, where masses gather together based on the principle of communion, the carnival heightens ecstatic emotional states. Carlo Goldoni would state: “*La stagion del Carnovale/ tutto il Mondo fa cambiar./ Chi sta bene e chi sta male/ Carnevale fa rallegrar*” (“The season of the Carnival/ changes everyone/ Whether healthy or sick/ The Carnival will cheer them up.”)¹. “During the Carnival festivities, bodies blend in indistinctly, since they pertain to the same general state of the community, which has reached incandescence. Nothing is more alien to these festivities than the idea of spectacle – of getting far and near merely through watching” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 28).

Mikhail Bakhtin defines carnival as an emotional set of laws, which eludes contemplation in favour of participation. As a show without a stage, in which the distinction between the actor and the spectator is abolished in favour of an active “insertion” in the game of the celebration, the carnival represents “life taken off its usual track”, a “reversed life” or an “upside-down life” (*apud* Ceașu, 2008, p. 107). Being a non-artistic type of show, “the carnival is a language of symbolic forms that are sense-based in a concrete way, by which one expresses an attitude vis-à-vis the world; they are forms that should be «read into», interpreted, and untangled. The carnival is an evocative, archaic, and spectacular formation of a popular character, which is meant to entertain and unleash energies that have been settling and smouldering in the collective unconscious” (Ceașu, 2008, p. 106).

Mihai Coman associates the carnival with multipurpose manifestations, particularly since it has made the subject of substantial descriptions by ethnographers, anthropologists, historians or even literates. The structural complexity of this type of manifestation drives Mihai Coman to believe that “it stands apart through its *heterogeneous* character (since it includes rites and ritualistic elements coming from the most diverse ceremonial “families”), *versatile* character (as the nature of its components, the order of elements, and the mechanisms of combining are always changing), and ambivalent character (its meanings are heavy with contradiction)” (Coman, 2008, p. 221).

One privileged space of the celebration is also the public square, which gathers everyone in the respective settlements. “Each person takes part in the collective effusion, in the chaotic crowd that pokes fun at the customs and precepts of religion. The most sacred principles are mocked by buffoons, fools, and kings of the Carnival, while parodies and sarcasm abound all around. The period of the Carnival temporarily suspends established customs and spurs their rebirth and regeneration through this passage into paradox” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 28).

The law that is instituted at such a time is that of breaking the law, as laughter and dancing help release built-up and suppressed drives. Laughter is considered a purifying element, which during the carnival characterizes the whole community, which is “united in the same ritualistic sacrifice of conventions” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 28). In the sacred sphere of the play, both “the child and the poet feel at ease, along with the savage. Aesthetic sensitivity has driven modern man a bit closer to that sphere”, Johan Huizinga believes (Huizinga, 2007, p. 74).

“Despite a persistent rain, nearly two million partygoers participating in the traditional Bola Preta «bloco» (carnival group) have occupied the streets of the city, dancing and singing to the rhythms of Samba. [...] As it follows the example of Rio de Janeiro, the whole of Brazil – a country with 193 million inhabitants – [...] stops its usual work schedule for a week, as it is swept over by the carnival fever, a tradition that is more than 150 years old”².

¹ http://www.carnivalofvenice.com/?page_id=1, accessed on January 3, 2012.

² „Carnavalul de la Rio”/ “The Rio Carnival”. *Gândul.info*, March 07, 2011, <http://www.gandul.info/international/carnavalul-de-la-rio-galerie-foto-8037390>, accessed on Jan. 3, 2012.

2. The Mundane Body of the Carnival

2.1. Opposite Viewpoints and Media Hypostases

“The grotesque body” of the carnival festivities is radically opposed to the modern body, states David Le Breton. “It is a go-between amongst people, a sign of alliance [...] that is not distinguished by people, as it otherwise happens with modern man, who is looked upon as a factor of individuation”. Protuberances and prominences highlight an exacerbated body, overflowing with vitality; a “big popular body of the species” – as Bakhtin would define it – that is “not distinguished from the rest of the world, is not closed-up, finished, or perfected, but goes beyond itself and its own limits. The focus is on the parts of the body where it is either open to the outer world, or is itself in the world – that is, around the orifices, the protuberances, and all the ramifications and excrescences: the open mouth, the genitals, the breasts, the phallus, the bulging abdomen, the nose” (*apud* Le Breton, 2002, p. 29). Subsequently, in the modern European culture, these body parts would become those of “decency”.

Jacques Heers states that the texts that depict the carnivalesque atmosphere – the first known one dating back to 1198 – “speak of thousands of fantasies and exuberant and irreverent acts that moralists will recount gladly in order to adorn their speeches and sermons with convenient clichés. The clergy were marching with monstrous masks on, dressed either as women, commoners, street entertainers or minstrels.” (*apud* Coman, 2008, p. 224).

One of the specific elements in the medieval carnival is the mask, which “holds an element of mystery even to the educated adult. The sight of a masked person – even as mere aesthetic perception, not linked to any clear religious representations – leads us straight outside «the usual life», into a world that is other than the one we see by daylight: into the sphere of the savage, of the child, and of the poet; into the sphere of play” (Huizinga, 2007, p. 74).

One of the best-known carnival festivities – which marks the passage from winter to spring – is the Carnival of Venice. The oldest document about it dates back to May 2, 1268.

“It was early on that Venetians started making their own masks and costumes that they would wear during the parades and the parties; identity, gender, and social status would simply cease to exist on this occasion”¹

“The masks worn during the Carnival would hide the differences between the social classes. Thus even the humblest of Venetians could be elegant and refined for one day. [...] There are five different types of Venetian masks: the *Bauta* mask – which usually covers the whole face – although there are some that only go down to the upper lip, so that the person could eat, drink, and speak more easily; the *Columbina* mask – covering only half of one’s face, very beautifully adorned, sometimes even with gold or silver; the *Moretta* mask – very popular among the Venetian women, because it would emphasize feminine features; the *Volto* or *Larva* mask – usually white and worn together with a cloak and tricorne; and the *Medico Della Peste* mask – which for all its macabre look is highly popular, having a long beak and round eyes covered with crystal disks. The mask of protection against the plague or the *Medico della Peste* was created in the 16th century by French physician Charles de Lorme, who would use it to protect himself from plague when he would treat his patients. Physicians who came after Charles de Lorme would wear it with a black hat and a long black cloak, along with white gloves and a cane”².

In Venice, through the carnival theme – which aims to reflect through clothing the different centuries that humanity has gone through – human presence is stylized and re-created via the costume. “Just as with all the other art objects, the costume has a *practical role*, a *communication role*, and an *aesthetic*

¹Raluca Ștefan, „Carnavalul de la Veneția, cel mai cunoscut din Europa”/“The Carnival of Venice, the Best Known in Europe”. Wall Street, Jan. 16, 2009, <http://www.wall-street.ro/slideshow/Lifestyle/57394/Carnavalul-de-la-Venetia-cel-mai-cunoscut-din-Europa.html>, accessed on Jan. 2, 2012.

²Lavinia Irimia, „Top 10 lucruri de știut despre... măștile venețiene”/“Top Ten Things to Know About Venetian Masks”. *Historia.ro*, http://www.historia.ro/exclusiv_web/general/articol/top-10-lucruri-stiut-mastile-venetiene, accessed on Jan. 2, 2012).

role” (Nanu, 2007, p. 12) and – we would add – in this case it also has a *play role*. One of the inherent features of the carnival is that it suspends the role of communication usually held by clothing. Adina Nanu believes that through the communication role, man reveals – through his aspect – the role that he holds “in the organization and hierarchy of the community” (Nanu, 2007, p. 12); whereas by “costuming” oneself, that characteristic disappears. The *aesthetic role* – which has to do with style and defines “the unitary expression of a creative personality” (Nanu, 2007, p. 15), the “artistic expression of an era, the concrete formulation of a collective aesthetics” and fashion ideal (Nanu, 2007, p. 15) etc, defined as “the rapid, sometimes unilateral succession of artistic forms whose main quality is novelty” (Nanu, 2007, p. 16) – is however present most prominently.

“In Venice, Andreea Raicu wore several costumes signed by fashion designer Doina Levintza. «For a few days I stepped into a fairy tale, into a different world. I forgot all about our reality, I forgot about Andreea Raicu. I was someone else. It is wonderful to forget about everything; to hide under your character’s mask. It is wonderful not to be known by anybody, to do anything, because everything is allowed during those days», the ex-model said. [...] It seems that celebrities such as Grace Jones and Ornella Mutti didn’t miss the events, either. «It was literally breathtaking when I stepped into the theatre hall. It all looked unreal. I was in another world. A world with 2000 characters from centuries past. The tens of boxes and the hall were full of Louis, Napoleons, queens, princesses, counts, and their heirs, all dressed impeccably, in some of the most beautiful ball attires. An unbelievable image.»”¹

The Carnival in Rio is of a completely different kind – where extravagant costumes, monumental allegorical chariots, and the famous “passistas” (dancers) belonging to different schools of samba give the starting signal for the spectacular carnival. The body becomes a vector of individuation, a “frontier from one person to another” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 43), a form that is an accessory of man. The body that is hidden or exacerbated through its prominent features is replaced by the exposed body, by the object-body. In modernity, Le Breton says, man cannot be distinguished from the “body that gives him a shape and an image, as the latter is infinitely present in the origin of all human action; but since rituals tend to hide the sense of its presence, just like a magic block where the body allows itself to be seen while it disappears, the body becomes infinitely absent” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 96). The body is exposed to viewing, although “appearance is the most subtle of masks” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 100) and beyond the formal exchange between the actors – which takes place through the gaze – “another, stronger exchange takes place, in a kind of day dream or reverie in which the other one’s body and its aesthetics are the support for a multitude of images” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 100).

“Almost 800,000 tourists watched the naked or almost naked women who flooded the streets of Rio de Janeiro during the famous carnival. In a competition that gets ever fiercer every year, Samba schools put forward many dancers, one more tempting than the other. Some of them were completely naked, “wearing” only body painting. Others displayed naked breasts or an exposed bottom”²

At the Rio Carnival it is not only the clothing that has disappeared, but more than that: the body does not have anything to hide any more, placing itself on stage through dancing and competition, in which “play is looked at ever more seriously” (Huizinga, 2002, p. 308). According to Adina Nanu and Ovidiu Buta, “today, when newspapers and TV present all the intimacies” (Nanu & Buta, 2009, p. 103), we tend to omit the fact that we also cover ourselves in decency. “In the absence of preconception, clothes no longer have the role of covering, but only of composing human image” (Nanu & Buta, 2009, p. 104).

¹ „Andreea Raicu a făcut senzație la Carnavalul de la Veneția” / “Andreea Raicu, Made Sensation at the Carnival of Venice”. Realitatea.net, 17. 02. 2010, http://www.realitatea.net/andreea-raicu-a-facut-senzatie-la-carnavalul-de-la-venetia-vezi-foto_700627.html#ixzz1iU128n4c, accessed on Jan. 4, 2012).

² „Femei goale, dezlănțuite la Carnavalul de la Rio” / “Naked Women Unleashed at the Rio Carnival”. Click, March 6, 2011, http://www.click.ro/pe_glob/mapamond/Femei-goale-dezlantuite-Carnavalul-Rio_0_1133886681.html, accessed on Jan. 3, 2012).

“The exacerbation of one’s own body leads to its being lost in the collective body, in the same way that fashion moves from the particular (what sets me apart) to the general (what makes me similar to others)”, Michel Maffesoli believes (2003, p. 92).

3. Conclusions

In one of his books, “*L’instant éternel*”, Michel Maffesoli notes that modernity and the evolution of society empower the idea of body and corporality, looking at them as subjects and that a whole symbolic content disappears and is being replaced by a type of theatre-making (spectacle) that manifests itself in the new forms of individuals’ reunions. Between the “costumed body”, typical of the Venetian carnival and the “spectacle body” that characterises the Rio festivities, multiple differences set in that do not necessarily pertain to the presence or absence of clothing. If at the Venice Carnival, man integrates in a playful space and is part of a carnivalesque “machinery”, in Rio, the distance of watching and of the play spectacle installs itself between the participants in the boxes or steps and the performers marching on the Sambadrom.

In Maffesoli’s terms, we witness a post-modern “youth-ism”, reflected in “the way of dressing, talking, «building up», and caring for, your body, or even thinking and meditating [...] – an imperative that no one and nothing can escape from” (Maffesoli, 2003, pp. 16 - 17) and which favours the myth of a *puer aeternus*.

The disappearance of traditions in the public square and the gradual regress of laughter and play in its original playful form mark the emergence of the modern body as an entity and a sign of distinctness between one man and another. Edgar Morin underlined that new myths, which characterise mass culture, focus on making a spectacle out of the modern-time “heroes” to whom common people relate and in whom they see themselves easily, by transferring upon them their suppressed desires, frustrations, and anxieties (*apud* Drăgan, 1996). In the mass culture – which is primarily conveyed by the mass-media – celebration tends to disappear in favour of show, while the “modern version of dualism opposes man to his body, as against the past, when the soul/spirit was opposed to the body” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 216).

Carnival places man at its centre as a playful species that re-creates itself as a *persona* in multiple roles, under a mask “which it could cast tomorrow, only to display and take on another face” (*ibidem*), while in the society of the spectacle, “the frivolousness of appearance enables contact among the various elements of the cosmos” (Maffesoli, 2003, p. 92).

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