

## Where This Essay is Going is Anyone's Guess.

*If a woman gets nervous, she'll eat or go shopping.  
A man will attack a country—It's a whole other way of thinking*  
—Elayne Boosler, quoted in *In Stitches* 1991

## Fainting Perimeters: Carnival comedy is inextricably linked with tragedy.

Satin-masked Michael Jackson dangled his son over a balcony in Berlin's *Hotel Adlon* in a beautifully archaic, near-mythic moment in 2002 to *some* outraged people, others in hysterics, a few mildly amused, and several who got back to their laundry—an artwork so convolutedly funny and menacing, it should've been bought by MoMa years ago. Further dangled over the railing that day—aside from intelligibility—was the shapeshifting nature of carnival comedy, temporary humor that escapes consequences, creates consequences, a vitiligo pendulum that blurs and disorients our psychological orientation: borderline-splitting, a heroic dimension, the liberating deliverance of Otherness, homeopathic doses of glitter-baroque enlightenment. Carnival comedy and its philosophical tenets are inextricably linked with tragedy: it gives us an occasion, a license to look and act differently, to be out of control, zany, to be frightened or frightening. It rejects and embraces tragedy simultaneously. Comedy that is always *becoming*,

The concepts of carnival—masks, floats, freaks, inversion, otherness—form a shell to inspect blurred lines: tragedy becoming comedy, comedy becoming tragedy, a dismantling of hierarchies—gloomy-gay imaginings of offhand comedic maelstroms and ultraviolet mental alibis. Carnival is a short-lived parody that lives in constant relation to tragedy: a very effective political tool. Singular narratives are interrupted, systems of exchange are fluid, circulation is privileged over stasis: a lyrical comedic libido and the aphrodisiac that comes with a healthy disdain for political correctness. Satire is a way of dismantling the house, without having to go to jail for it.

## Caramel Dionysia: Tragedy becomes comedy.

Dionysia Carnival (5th Century Greece) originated as six days of madness, humor, freaks, masks, distortion, a petri-dish thematic that floodlights human behavior. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe funfairs as *a loose amalgam of procession, feasting, competition, games, and spectacle*, through which all our ideas of freaky, abhorrence, shell-colored sanguinity and comedy are purged or teased out.<sup>1</sup> Which is to say, what is considered tragic, unthinkable, perverse is inverted—albeit momentarily. Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! Russian Eeyore theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's Ferris-wheel theories of *carnavalesque* pirouette alongside his theory of the shifting nature of language, which he called *dialogical*.<sup>2</sup> Left, perhaps, with a bad taste in his mouth after the Stalin purges suppressed his work, Bakhtin's *dialogical* seemed hellbent on dismantling a singular, authoritative interpretation of ideas. Indigenous to a Bakhtinian *carnavalesque* is pervasive, debatable laughter and its intrinsic democratic nature. On Eeyore's carousel, disparate elements mix in wild abandon, confound class, hierarchies, social positions, propriety—a 'festive critique,' a vague nebulous, reconfiguring the world through laughter. Abject categories of class are abolished, status obliterated: carnival liberates through rejection. She turns what's shameful into a comedic coup. Also flagging the blurred lines of the funfair, Robert Stam notes: *In carnival, all that is marginalized and excluded—the mad, the scandalous, the aleatory—takes over the center in a liberating explosion of otherness. The principle of material body-hunger, thirst, defecation, copulation—becomes a positively corrosive*

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 178, 189.

<sup>2</sup> David H. Richter, *The Critical Tradition*, ed. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 725.

*force, and festive laughter enjoys symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts.*<sup>3</sup>

Here we are together, building on a new wing for the mistress. The effect of carnivalesque is no less than a revolution.

### **Coney Island Baby: Tragedy or comedy.**

In the hands of Lady Carnival, appetites for fluctuant comedy are whetted, a yearning to cross-dress ways of acceptability, to provide a questionable, inexpensive tasting menu for political incorrectness, to laugh at others as a way of laughing at ourselves— or perhaps the inverse. Ourselves show up in all sorts of ways. A spontaneous trip to Coney Island or Sydney's Mardi Gras or the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade continues the ooze of narcoleptic desuetude in comedic theatricality, placing masks and freaks and drag queens and clowns on homemade floats—but *not* a pedestal. Blow-up sex dolls resembling politicians being fucked up the ass float on clouds, fairies eat rosé fairy floss, quotes we're not sure are real or speculative fiction spelled out in pink-azure crêpe-paper, a quadrupled heteroglossia: *I just received a beautiful letter from Kim Jong-un.* (Donald Trump, 2019). Did he *really* say that? (The answer is usually yes).

The carnival float *is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits, obscenely de-centered and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion.*<sup>4</sup> We laugh at the unfuckable Elephant Man, jaundiced Frankenstein, hyperpigmented Michael, the congenital disfigurements of Phantom of the Opera: conditions considered tragic outside of carnival. We're unrepentant. It's Lady Carnival who purchases a *papier-mâché* music box, replaces the ballerina with a horny, geriatric pregnant woman, or fully grown adults on the helter-skelter in the last vestiges of dignity. Nothing is beneath her.

Freud's really bullshit ideas about hysterical women (Studies of Hysteria 1895)<sup>5</sup> are, unfortunately, a worthy resemblance of carnival comedy-madness. Hysterical infusions of eating inversion, dirt, mess, *bouffons*, poor impulse control, *certainly repressed and sublimated desires and terrors erupted into the extreme bodily attenuations and pantomimed gestures of the hysterical body, whose rigidly stylized postures referred to the impulses, pleasures, and excesses it was not free to indulge in.*<sup>6</sup> Comedy that transcends what is appropriate, transforms shock and injury into sitcom: a symbolic confetti-obfuscation of humor. And we love it; we just don't want anyone to know we do.

### **Speak No More: Comedy becomes tragedy.**

A group of thespians continues the chaotic theatrical excess in a site-specific punchdrunk rendition of *Macbeth* in a five-story abandoned warehouse in downtown Chelsea. The Mckittrick Hotel transforms the play into a speakeasy film-noir where audience members roam the ghostly corridors wearing white Phantom of the Opera masks. Behind the mask, silence is demanded at all times. There must be, it seems to me, a psychological drive to create comedic worlds *which serves to break up orientations, to weaken and frustrate the tyrannous drive to order, to prepare the individual to observe what the orientation tells him is irrelevant, but what may very well be relevant.*<sup>7</sup> A show deemed 'participatory,' so long as you don't speak, but I'm not sure that's relevant? Whatever, it's a wager people are willing to take.

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 86.

<sup>4</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studies of Hysteria* (London: Hogarth Press edition, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> See Stallybrass and White, *Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnavalesque*, in idem, *Transgression*, 171-90.

<sup>7</sup> Marcia Tucker, *Morse Peckham, Man's Rage for Chaos* (1965), in idem, *Out Of Bounds* (New York: Getty Publications, 2019), 85.

The downstairs bodega hosts infinite pre-curtain, shitty first dates (I would know) before diving into the enlightenment of the sideshow in comical white guise— concealment, *nuit blanche* cover-up, a psychedelic camouflage. Nervous laughter is unavoidable. A fussy Rococo sonnet of political ambition's psychological effects on those who seek power for its own sake, starring a nervous, silenced, suicidal heroine— the usual markings of misogynistic attitudes. Tragic blood-on-her-hands Lady Macbeth gags the audience in ironic projection: it's all very Fassbinder. Comedy that obscures tragedy and disorients *just enough* for us to forget the story is, in actuality, horribly prejudiced—an irony *with* consequences, without consequences. Our masks reveal a scarlet air of inattention, an inadequate (fortunately) knowledge of Shakespeare, a fact we'd never admit but probably couldn't anyway behind helium-esque hyperventilation. Lady Macbeth has the last laugh—she who laughs lasts, I guess.

But at least we get laid.

#### **Four Seasons Hotel: Tragic metamorphosis;**

Meme generators met their match on the 7th of November 2020 in a tacky asphalt car park in northeast Philadelphia. Mistaking it for *Four Seasons* 5-star hotel, the Trump administration booked *Four Seasons Total Landscaping* for their re-election campaign press conference. A *hilarious* happenstance between Donald Trump and Associated Press, triangulated by the blue-neon sign of an overworked sex shop and a very competitive crematorium: the odds of a resurrection were most definitely in the crematorium's favor. It smacks of jealousy. Trump and Giuliani's sweaty parking-lot electoral race to the end is history's undisputed winner for comedy, even before absentee counts. Donald's chemistry with Kim Jung-un, fake tan, and the people of 'Nambia' crescendoed in an uproarious (high art) prosthetic-aesthetic, built on the back of what is tragic. Laughing is a very serious thing. Healthy defense mechanisms and admissions not being Trump's strong suit, he responded *just relax; it was intentional*.

*You* relax; you're the dead guy. (Whoopi Goldberg, Ghost)

A tar garden of death-drive flowers, meme-busters, carcinogenic hand sanitizer, landscaping a springtime space where people misbehaving has been raised to a high art form— a fiasco *sans* mask.

Beyond bourgeois hysteria, satirical regicides, and rubber vampire teeth, carnival comedy rejects *and* co-exists with tragedy. In the very least, it's a break from the daily grind. The masks of Dionysus, of New York's *Speak No More*, of Coney Island clowns are temporal spaces, ephemeral role reversals unrecognizable today. Carnival pours onto the floor yet another configuration, no longer relegated to six-day festivals or Thanksgiving long weekend. Her out-of-bounds attributes, unending metamorphosis, and slippery aesthetic invert and congeals in a carnival of sinister profusion: quotidian Covid. Again, the pendulum swings, carnival splinters and mutates before our very eyes, the temporary becomes perpetual perversion: our FFP masks of milky ubiquity, a symbolic reminder of the shape-shifting nature of carnival comedy. Lines are vague, reversed, inert, unresolved; a rainbow archway prolonged. Comedy and tragedy arm-in-arm.

Lady Carnival is the prodigal son who returned and outstayed his welcome.

Where *this* comedy is going is anyone's guess.

LOL

