

Carnival!

# Approaches to Semiotics 64

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## Foreword

When *Código e mensagem do Carnaval* reached me, from Brazil, early in 1976, I was at once entranced by its artistic design of arrested but illuminated movement, informed by semiotically sophisticated interpretation. Although I was determined to provide this intelligence about the *escolas de samba* for the benefit of the English reading public, various technical difficulties delayed the appearance of this version for eight years.

During this hiatus, Ivanov's erudite semiotic theory of carnival appeared, in the Soviet Union, in 1977, and is here presented in English, with an important—if brief—postscript by the author.

Another outstanding semiotician's (hitherto unpublished) remarks—those of Eco on the carnival vis-à-vis the comic—open this triptych of a text.

In providing variations by the outstanding Russian and Italian masters on the themes so colorfully displayed by Monica Rector, the embogged realization of this project may, it is hoped, be pardoned.

April 1, 1983

Thomas A. Sebeok





UMBERTO ECO

## The frames of comic 'freedom'

The idea of carnival has something to do with comic. So, to clarify the definition of carnival it would suffice to provide a clear-cut definition of comic. Unfortunately, we lack such a definition. From antiquity to Freud or Bergson, every attempt to define comic seems to be jeopardized by the fact that this is an umbrella term (referring, in a Wittgensteinian jargon, to a network of family resemblances) that gathers together a disturbing ensemble of diverse and not completely homogeneous phenomena, such as humor, comedy, grotesque, parody, satire, wit, and so on.

There is, however, one definition of comedy that seems to produce, as a side effect, a complementary definition of carnival: this is the one provided by the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*. There is only a minor inconvenience: this book was either lost or was never even written – an irreparable loss, indeed. Fortunately, that which Aristotle could have said about comedy can be extrapolated from two sources: the observations on comedy and witty manipulation of language that can be found *passim* in *Poetics* (book 1) and *Rhetoric*; and the post-Aristotelian Greek and Latin tradition, with its various more or less anonymous treatises on comedy (for instance *Tractatus Coislinianus*) which allow us to speculate about a possible Aristotelian treatment of comedy.

Following this line of thought (let me consider my attempt an exercise in the Peircean art of 'fair guesses' or abductions) we can outline some basic differences between tragedy and comedy.

The tragic effect is realized when: (i) there is the violation of a rule (call it a Code, a social frame, a law, a set of social premises) which (ii) is committed by somebody we can sympathize with, since he is a character of noble condition, not so bad as to be repulsive, not so good as to escape identification, and (iii) we recognize that the rule has been broken since we feel it to be either still valid ('do not kill your father') or at least sufficiently justified by the context (in the Bible: 'do not disregard the commands of God'); facing

such a violation, (iv) we agree that it was bad, (v) we suffer with the hero because we understand, in some way share his remorse, and participate in his own expectation of the possible or necessary punishment (pity and fear), and (vi) we feel peaceful when we realize that the sinner has been rightly punished and has in some way accepted his punishment (we enjoy the reaffirmation of the power of the rule).

On the other hand, comic effect is realized when: (i) there is the violation of a rule (preferably, but not necessarily, a minor one, like an etiquette rule); (ii) the violation is committed by someone with whom we do not sympathize because he is an ignoble, inferior, and repulsive (animal-like) character; (iii) therefore we feel superior to his misbehavior and to his sorrow for having broken the rule; (iv) however in recognizing that the rule has been broken, we do not feel concerned; on the contrary we in some way welcome the violation; we are, so to speak, revenged by the comic character who has challenged the repressive power of the rule (which involves no risk to us, since we commit the violation only vicariously); (v) our pleasure is a mixed one because we enjoy not only the breaking of the rule but also the disgrace of an animal-like individual; (vi) at the same time we are neither concerned with the defense of the rule nor compelled toward compassion for such an inferior being. Comic is always racist: only the others, the Barbarians, are supposed to pay.

This definition of comic leads us to the idea of carnival. How do we succeed in finding situations in which we are not concerned by the rules? Naturally enough (as an entire ethnological and artistic tradition witnesses), by establishing an upside-down world (*monde renversé*) in which fish fly and birds swim, in which foxes and rabbits chase hunters, bishops behave crazily, and fools are crowned. At this point we feel *free*, first for sadistic reasons (comic is diabolic, as Baudelaire reminded us) and second, because we are liberated from the fear imposed by the existence of the rule (which produces anxiety). Comic pleasure means enjoying the murder of the father, provided that others, less human than ourselves, commit the crime.

It is for this reason that the animalization of the comic hero is so important. The tragic hero cannot be an animal (at most it can be an anthropomorphized animal: Walt Disney's Bambi). We even shed tears for Snow White poisoned by the apple; we do not cry for the seven dwarves who weep for their Princess — on the contrary, we feel relieved from our own sorrow concerning Snow White's fate precisely because of the laughable pain of the dwarves. Our tension for the tragedy is mitigated by the ridiculization of the majesty of sorrow through the ridiculization of the zoomorphic little men. They are the mask through which we can pass over in laughter the difficulty of living.

Now it is understandable in which sense carnival is connected with comedy. By assuming a mask, everyone can behave like the animal-like characters of comedy. We can commit any sin while remaining innocent: and we are indeed innocent, because we laugh (which means: we are not concerned with *that*). But now, following Bakhtin, we can go a little (?) step further. Carnival is the natural theater in which animals and animal-like beings take over the power and become the masters. In carnival even kings act like the populace. Comic behavior, formerly an object of a judgment of superiority on our part, becomes, in this case, our own rule. The upside-down world has become the norm. Carnival is revolution (or revolution is carnival): kings are decapitated (that is, lowered, made inferior) and the crowd is crowned.

Such a transgressional theory has many chances to be popular, today, even among the happy few. It sounds very aristocratic. There is but one suspicion to pollute our enthusiasm: the theory is unfortunately false.

If it were true, it would be impossible to explain why power (any social and political power throughout the centuries) has used *circenses* to keep the crowds quiet; why the most repressive dictatorships have always censured parodies and satires but not clowneries; why humor is suspect but circus is innocent; why today's mass media, undoubtedly instruments of social control (even when not depending upon an explicit plot) are based mainly upon the funny, the ludicrous, that is, upon a continuous carnivalization of life. To support the universe of business, there is no business like show business.

Therefore, there is something wrong with this theory of cosmic carnivalization as global liberation. There is some diabolic trick in the appeal to the great cosmic/comic carnival.

Bakhtin was right in seeing the manifestation of a profound drive towards liberation and subversion in Medieval carnival. The hyper-Bakhtinian ideology of carnival as *actual* liberation may, however, be wrong.

In order to better understand this point, we should now approach the opposition 'tragic' versus comic' from another point of view. It seems, according to common opinion, that tragedy and drama are more 'universal' than comic. In other words, it seems that everybody ought to sympathize with the sufferings of Oedipus, while it is very difficult to laugh at disgraces of the comic heroes of Greek comedy. We feel pity and terror for the destiny of Plato's Socrates, expecting that the poison has definitely performed its lethal action, but we are uncertain why we should laugh at the Socrates of Aristophanes. We are absolutely impermeable to nonwestern comedy, while we are able to understand eastern tragedies (we understand that there is something tragic or dramatic in the story of *Rashomon*, but we do not really understand the reason behind why or when Japanese or Chinese laugh unless we are endowed with some ethnographic information). Therefore, the tragic seems

to deal with 'eternal' problems (life and death, love and hate), while comedy seems to be more closely linked to specific social habits.

This is, however, due to a curious case of textual *trompe-l'oeil*. In fact, why should a modern spectator be involved with the story of Orestes, who is *obliged* (according to the tragic tradition) to kill his own mother? Without being compelled to think of the embarrassing situation of a member of a polyandric society reading *Madame Bovary* (and wondering why this woman had so many problems in having more than one man), it is enough to think of a sophisticated reader belonging to our own permissive western society. Should a *Playboy* reader be concerned with the sufferings of Clarissa, obsessed by remorse for having accepted the courtship of Lovelace? Why do we feel compassion (pity and fear) for characters tied to social and religious rules that are no longer our own?

In fact, every tragic or dramatic text not only tells the story of a violation of a rule, it restates the rule. *Madame Bovary* is first of all a long and passionate argument against adultery or, at least, about the impossibility of adultery in nineteenth-century bourgeois society. In Greek tragedy, one of the main tasks of the chorus is precisely to describe and to impose the majesty of the rule that the hero is on the verge of breaking. Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* is first of all a convincing lesson about the social and moral impossibility, for a middle-aged male intellectual, of falling in love with an adolescent of his own sex. It is only after the reinforcement of the rule that the tragic text informs us of the hero's violation, and to what extent he could not avoid the violation. In a way, a tragic (or dramatic) text is always a lesson in cultural anthropology; it makes even its future readers aware of a certain rule, even though this rule was previously alien to their cultural sensitivity. And only after having introjected the rule can the reader feel compassion for the hero who has violated it.

There can be a tragic description of a cannibal, belonging to a cannibalistic society, who refuses to pay homage to the customs of his own community (thus undergoing the fatal and necessary punishment) only if the tragic text has provided a convincing description of the power and majesty of that rule. Otherwise the story would sound whimsical or blatantly ludicrous (suppose: the comic vicissitudes of a dispeptic or vegetarian cannibal unable to fill his social duties. . .)

In terms of a textual semiotics (see Eco 1979), one should say that tragic (and dramatic) texts are first of all supposed to establish both the common and the intertextual *frames* whose violation produced the so-called tragic situation.

On the contrary, in comedy (understood according to our pseudo-Aristotelian definition), the broken frame must be *presupposed* but *never spelled out*.

What happens in comedy also happens, according to the rules of rhetoric, in irony: irony asserts the contrary of that which is considered to be the case, and is effective only if the case is not explicitly asserted. Irony means saying ' $\sim p$ ' when, on the contrary ' $p$ ' is the case. But if one asserts ' $\sim p$ ' and immediately afterward informs one's interlocutor that 'in fact, as you know,  $p$  is the case', the ironic effect is destroyed.

Let us consider a typical example of a slapstick comedy situation: during a formal dinner somebody throws a cream pie in the face of somebody else. In order to recognize the situation as a comic one, one ought to know that (i) such behavior is *usually* forbidden by good manners and (ii) food must usually be eaten and not wasted in unreasonable *pottlatchs*. Additionally, to increase the comic effect, there is the animalization of the human face splattered with cream. But no one would laugh at a human face splattered with soap in a barber shop (the animalization is permitted by the frame), nor will one laugh at a human face splattered with mustard (the consumption of cream — more expensive — is more *frame-breaking*).

Years ago the magazine *Mad* published a series of comic strips called 'The movies we would like to see', in which, for instance, a gang of outlaws was tying a beautiful girl to railroad tracks. Then, in alternate shots, the customary situation takes place: the train approaches and the good guys rush on horseback to rescue the beautiful one. At the end the train wins, and smashes the girl. In order to enjoy this piece of chicanery, one must be aware of the background *genre rule* (namely, western movie) whose violation produces the comic pleasure. But the rule must be *presupposed* and taken for granted.

Many comic situations can be produced by breaking Grice's conversational maxims, provided there is no reason to presuppose an implicature or some other rhetorical usage. The maxim of quantity can be comically violated by a dialogue like:

A. Do you know what time it is?

B. Yes, I do.

The maxim of quality (do not say what you do not have adequate evidence for) can be comically violated this way:

- A. I hate this philosopher! He is so confused and he writes so badly. Fortunately I have never read a single page of him! (personal communication by one of my university professors, 1953)

In the same way, one can comically violate the maxims of manner and of relation, and it is not so difficult to find adequate examples. What re-

mains compulsory, in order to produce a comic effect, is the prohibition of spelling out the norm. It must be presupposed both by the utterer and by the audience. If the speaker spells it out, he is a fool, or a jerk; if the audience does not know it, there is no comic effect.

All this will easily explain why tragic seems to be more 'universal' than comic. The *trompe-l'oeil* effect is due to the fact that in the first case the rule is explicitly outlined, and in the second it is only presupposed. But such a textual principle also explains why the so-called comic or carnivalesque 'liberation' appeared so suspect. Carnival, in order to be enjoyed, requires that rules and rituals be parodied, and that these rules and rituals already be recognized and respected. One must know to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden, and must feel the majesty of the forbidding norm, to appreciate their transgression. Without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible. During the Middle Ages, counterrituals such as the Mass of the Ass or the coronation of the Fool were enjoyable just because, during the rest of the year, the Holy Mass and the true King's coronation were sacred and respectable activities. The *Coena Cypriani* quoted by Bakhtin, a burlesque representation based upon the subversion of topical situations of the Scriptures, was enjoyed as a comic transgression only by people who took the same Scriptures seriously during the rest of the year. To a modern reader, the *Coena Cypriani* is only a boring series of meaningless situations, and even though the parody is recognized, it is not felt as a provocative one. Thus the prerequisites of a 'good' carnival are: (i) the law must be so pervasively and profoundly introjected as to be overwhelmingly present at the moment of its violation (and this explains why 'barbaric' comedy is hardly understandable); (ii) the moment of carnivalization must be very short, and allowed only once a year (*semel in anno licet insanire*); an everlasting carnival does not work: an entire year of ritual observance is needed in order to make the transgression enjoyable.

Carnival can exist only as an *authorized* transgression (which in fact represents a blatant case of *contradictio in adjecto* or of happy *double binding* – capable of curing instead of producing neurosis). If the ancient, religious carnival was limited in time, the modern mass-carnival is limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen.

In this sense, comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule.

Carnivalization can act as a revolution (Rabelais, or Joyce) when it appears unexpectedly, frustrating social expectations. But on one side it produces its own mannerism (it is reabsorbed by society) and on the other side it is acceptable when performed within the limits of a laboratory situation



(literature, stage, screen. . .). When an unexpected and nonauthorized carnivalization suddenly occurs in 'real' everyday life, it is interpreted as revolution (campus confrontations, ghetto riots, blackouts, sometimes true 'historical' revolutions). But even revolutions produce a restoration of their own (revolutionary rules, another *contradictio in adjecto*) in order to install their new social model. Otherwise they are not effective revolutions, but only uprisings, revolts, transitory social disturbances.

There is neither positive nor negative connotation in this picture describing social mechanisms. Ripeness consists in acknowledging them.

In a world dominated by diabolical powers, in a world of everlasting transgression, nothing remains comic or carnivalesque, nothing can any longer become an object of parody, if not transgression itself (see *Animal House*: but finally Blutarsky becomes a U.S. senator).

At this point one should conclude that the comic is only an instrument of social control and can never be a form of social criticism. But I have started by saying that 'comic' is an umbrella term covering disparate phenomena. The sort of comic we have discussed until this point is that of ancient comedy, realized in the form of peasant's festivals; it was the representation (in theater) and the self-expression (in carnival) of lower classes and 'marginal' societies. The upside-down world was represented in Medieval miniatures only in the margins of manuscripts: *marginalia*. The upper classes (through their poets) depicted the peasants as animals (in comedy); then they allowed the same peasants to 'freely' express themselves (in carnival) exactly as they were depicted by theater. Popular cultures are always determined by cultivated cultures.

There are other types of comic. Aristotle, for instance, speaks in the *Rhetoric* of a verbal comic, of wits, of sophisticated plays with words that seem to have a more critical power.

Since the age of romanticism, many theorists have spoken about an attitude, variously defined as irony or humor, in which the relationship between rule and violation is differently balanced.

In this essay on humor, Luigi Pirandello said that if the comic is the perception of the opposite, humor is the 'sentiment' of the opposite. A case of comic is a decrepit old woman who smears her face with make-up and dresses like a young girl; facing such a picture one notices that this woman is the opposite of what a respectable old woman should be. In a case of humor, one understands why the old woman masks herself, to regain her lost youth. The character is still animal-like, but in some way one sympathizes with it. One finds oneself halfway between tragedy and comedy. This happens because humor attempts to reestablish and reassert the broken frame. It does not act in order to make us accept that system of values, but at least it obliges

us to acknowledge its existence. The laughter, mixed with pity, without fear, becomes a *smile*. There is still a sense of superiority, but with a shade of tenderness. In comedy we laugh at the character. In humor we smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is at fault. Maybe the frame is wrong. Don Quixote, unable to understand that the chivalric ideal he still follows is out of date, is a fool, but his foolishness is also due to the falsity of his ideal. He is not breaking a rule that we wish destroyed vicariously by him: we are not blindly presupposing the rule we are rediscovering and judging it as far as Quixote falls in its trap. Reading Cervantes, we are not subjugated by the majesty of an 'eternal' or rediscovered law, and we are not presupposing a law that also holds for ourselves. Simply, we criticize with Cervantes a set of cultural and intertextual frames. Thus the performance of humor acts as a form of social criticism. Humor is always, if not metalinguistic, metasemiotic: through verbal language or some other sign system it casts in doubt other cultural codes. If there is a possibility of transgression, it lies in humor rather than in comic.

Semiotically speaking, if comic (in a text) takes place at the level of *fabula* or of narrative structures, humor works in the interstices between narrative and discursive structures: the attempt of the hero to comply with the frame or to violate it is developed by the *fabula*, while the intervention of the author, who renders explicit the presupposed rule, belongs to the discursive activity and represents a metasemiotic series of statements about the cultural background of the *fabula*.

Humor does not pretend, like carnival, to lead us beyond our own limits. It gives us the feeling, or better, the picture of the structure of our own limits. It is never off limits, it undermines limits from inside. It does not fish for an impossible freedom, yet it is a true movement of freedom. Humor does not promise us liberation: on the contrary, it warns us about the impossibility of global liberation, reminding us of the presence of a law that we no longer have reason to obey. In doing so it undermines the law. It makes us feel the uneasiness of living under a law—any law.

Very seldom does the business of entertainment display real humor. More frequently it sells carnival. When a real piece of humour appears, entertainment becomes avantgarde: a supreme philosophical game. We smile because we feel sad for having discovered, only for a moment, the truth. But at this moment we have become too wise to believe it. We feel quiet and peaceful, a little angry, with a shade of bitterness in our minds. Humor is a *cold* carnival.



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Umberto Eco (b. 1932) is professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, vice president of the IASS, and editor of *VS*. His principal research interest is semiotic studies. Among his major publications are *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), *The Role of the Reader* (1979), and *The Name of the Rose* (1983).



V.V. IVANOV

## The semiotic theory of carnival as the inversion of bipolar opposites\*

Translated by R. Reeder and J. Rostinsky

*To the Eternal Memory of M.M. Bakhtin*

The general theory of carnival as an inversion of binary oppositions, outlined by Bakhtin,<sup>1</sup> has been supported by contemporary ethnological research devoted to rituals of the inversion of social position (status reversal). This research has established certain basic characteristics of cyclical and calendrical rituals in which the whole collective participates. At certain moments in the seasonal cycle, which are defined differently in various cultures, certain groups (or categories) of people, usually occupying an inferior position, exercise ritual authority over their superiors. The latter in turn (e.g., officers of the British army who wait on the soldiers at Christmas) must accept their ritual degradation with good will. The inferiors accompany such rituals with vulgar verbal and nonverbal behavior and treat their superiors scornfully, mocking them and addressing them in obscenities. In the ritual performance, the inferiors often establish a hierarchy that resembles a parody of the normal hierarchical order of the superiors (Turner 1969: 167–168ff.).

Typical examples cited by ethnologists are the cargo cults widespread among the inhabitants of Melanesia. In these cults the specific characteristics of the European administrative structure are imitated. The cargo cults share a common belief that Europeans would be expelled or destroyed, while native prophets and ancestors would rule over them, forming their own 'pseudo-bureaucratic structure' (Turner 1969: 191). According to certain variants of the cargo cult, the white man must be reduced to the position of a black worker performing menial labor (Mead and Schwartz 1960: 83). Therefore, the cargo cults must be seen as an expression of a tendency toward 'an

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\* This article appeared in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* 8, 45–640 Tartu: Tartu University, 1977.

*inversion of the existing orders*' (Worsley 1963: 347).<sup>2</sup> A good illustration of the early stages of this is the natives' use of the cricket club movement for creating their own internal 'carnival' organization, including a governor, chief justice, and secretary of state (Worsley 1963: 37). From the sociolinguistic point of view, inversion is symbolized by the spread of a 'new Melanesian' language, derived from pidgin English, which functions as the main language. In cargo cults, the belief that in the future (at the end of the world) there will be an inversion of the relationship between the white and the black typologically resembles similar beliefs about previous and future inversions. In such inversions there is a reversal of the basic interrelationships among members of binary polar oppositions (of the type male/female, mountain/sea) in mythologies such as the Ainu, according to which 'at the beginning of the universe phenomena were reverse of those known today. Thus, the Ainu were small in size; men, instead of women, menstruated; and locations of the sea and mountains were reversed. The Ainu have been told by the deities through shamans that the state of phenomena will be reversed again at the end of the universe' (Ohnuki-Tierney 1969: 489).

The inversion of the binary opposition male/female, which is essential for the cosmogonical and eschatological schemata of Ainu mythology as well as for others typologically similar to it, appears to be a determining factor in a significant number of carnival rites involving status reversal. In those areas of Western Europe where the ancient carnival tradition has been preserved, the donning of masks of the opposite sex by the carnival participants remains the salient feature of the ritual: 'During the masquerade the sex of maskers is concealed and the sexes may reverse roles, women asking dances of unmasked men' (Galt 1973: 337, 326, 332, 336).<sup>3</sup>

Rituals in which girls put on male attire and herd cattle have been discovered in many societies of southern and central Bantu tribes. This type of ritual may be performed if catastrophe threatens tribal territory (Rigby 1968).<sup>4</sup> The welfare of the tribe is restored by addressing those who are 'normally thought of as beneath the battle for jural and political status. But 'beneath' has two senses: it is not only that which is structurally inferior; it is also the common basis of all social life — the earth and its fruits. In other words, what is law on one social dimension may be basic on another' (Turner 1969: 184). The ideas of the leading ethno-Africanist, Victor Turner, who has thoroughly studied the rituals of status reversal, coincide with Bakhtin's concept of the role of the 'inferior' in carnival images.

The wedding rituals that include transvestism are particularly interesting for developing Bakhtin's concept of carnival as an inversion of binary semiotic oppositions. This problem has been investigated in detail in S.M. Eisenstein's unpublished monographs *Method* and *Grundproblem*. In his