

# Deconstructing Carnival New Orleans

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## Abstract



We use Bakhtin’s (1940/1968) dissertation on Rabelais to deconstruct *Carnival New Orleans*. There is something different about this carnival and the ones that Rabelais (1532) wrote about in his Renaissance novels. We introduce Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalesque metamorphosis: that two simultaneous forces, degeneration and renewal, death and birth, dethroning and revitalizing, and so forth, are at work in the marketplace.

**Why New Orleans?** Why did the Academy of Management choose (once again) New Orleans? There are lots of hotels and something touristy to do? Tourism is 16.7% of the New Orleans economy. We are among the many conventioners and tourists traveling to experience the carnivalesque New Orleans atmosphere. There is also gambling: Harrah’s Casino (2600 employees) is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest employer in New Orleans; their business is entertainment.

## Photo 1 – New Orleans Carnival<sup>1</sup>

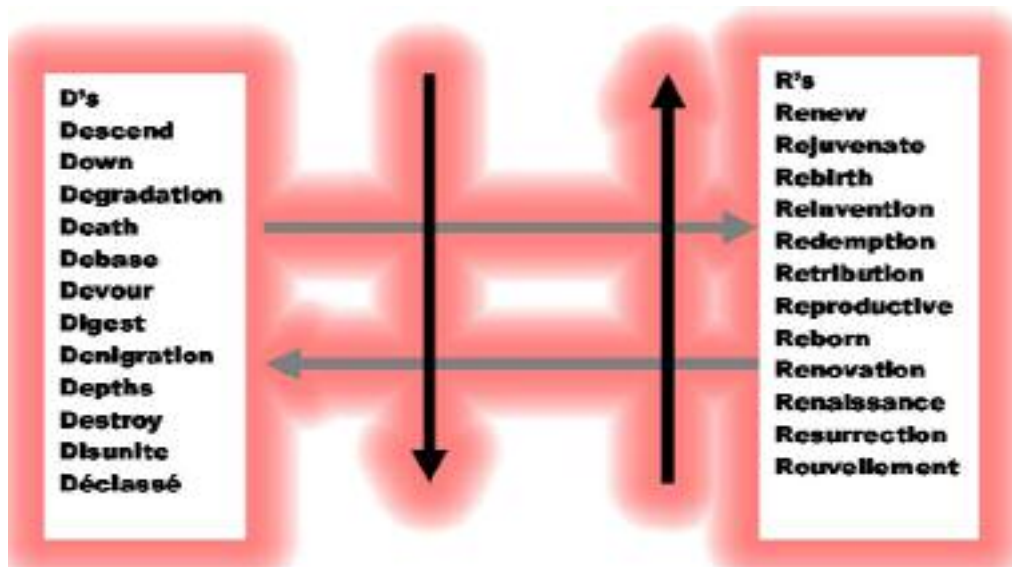
**What has New Orleans Carnival got to do with the Academy of Management?** This is about business, and the management, organization and orchestration of carnival. Each year \$950 million is spend on the New Orleans Mardi Gras, which attracts 500,000 visitors. The rest of the year, New Orleans business community does its best to be an economic part of the carnivalesque, vibrant, satiric, sassy, and sexy street atmosphere.

Ours is an antenarrative theory. An antenarrative is a gambler’s bet that a (pre) story can be told that will change the world (Boje, 2001). Whereas a narrative is all finished and polished, an antenarrative is more of an adduction. Specifically, our antenarrative bet is that the cycle of metamorphosis that inhered in the carnival of the Middles Ages into the

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<sup>1</sup> Photo in Figure 1 and Carnival New Orleans image sources  
<http://www.icorp.net/carnival/rpic/crowd00s.jpg>

Renaissance can become a transformative force in capitalism. We view the New Orleans celebrations as spectacle that has appropriated carnival, but dimmed its most important gift: the metamorphosis cycle (Boje & Cai, 2004).



**Figure 1 – Simultaneous forces of the D's and R's in Carnavalesque Metamorphosis**

Figure 1 lists some of the many D and R words that Bakhtin (1968) uses to describe metamorphosis. There was an ancient time when carnival was more than a comic pageant or parade in the marketplace. Carnival was a time to parody official seriousness and loftiness of spectacle. Bakhtin (1940/1968: 5-6) theorized that there were two worlds: the first world of official spectacle, and the second world of carnival.

**Our Deconstructive Moves** – Our first deconstruct is to see the double aspect of the spectacle/carnival world. It is not a duality, but a between. In the spectacle world of the Academy as well as New Orleans, there is a serious tone and organization to the permissible laughter. In the ancient Roman processions or even the solemn funeral, there was simultaneous deriding and glorifying during the event.

We contend that contemporary spectacle has appropriated carnival in ways that defeats the metamorphosis. In contemporary times, the equality of spectacle and carnival seems impossible. There are still carnival qualities: “In fact, carnival does not know footlights; in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” (Bakhtin, 1940/1968: 7). But, it is Guy Debord’s (1968) *Society of the Spectacle* that rules here.

Our contribution is that we believe the cycle of metamorphosis contributed something important to society, including that marketplace. In the clash of official spectacle and carnivalesque parody, there was degradation, but also renewal.

Right now, we are not convinced that *Carnival New Orleans* is about metamorphic transformation. What is missing is grotesque realism.

**What is Grotesque Realism?** Grotesque realism is not just the R's and D's; it is the material force of the lower bodily stratum (Bakhtin, 1940/1968: 19). Grotesque is when bodily flesh, bones and fluids becomes exaggerated with fertility and "brimming-over" with abundance. Bodily also refers to the world, to descending into the earthly grave that is also a womb for rebirth. I have been studying the grotesque realism in McDonaldland, its fantastic netherworld relationship to the corporation; such as, discrowning the corporation as it is parodied in that underworld, and then using its ascent to become more elevated and loftier than before. The grotesque carnival was not an official spectacle whose comic actors played their parts like marionettes on a string. The difference is that the clown of grotesque realism "degrades chivalry and ceremonial" (p. 20) institutions with the descents to and from the lower material bodily stratum (or netherworld). In short, it is through grotesque realism of the carnival, that the Middle Age institution was brought down to earth. It was in the descent, devouring, and degradation that spectacle itself was renewed.

Grotesque realism is not as powerful as it once was; it's liberatory and renewing illumination faded with the advent of modernity, and was all but snuffed out by the Renaissance when François Rabelais (1532) wrote his novels; that was Bakhtin's thesis. There is no long a viable regenerative metamorphosis cycle that is happening in Academy or New Orleans; only a faded copy of a copy that is so blurred it does not do the job.

We think with Grotesque Method we can Revive Carnival. Boje (2004) did a piece on grotesque method. Grotesque method is not precisely defined by Bakhtin (1968: 28); I read a double meaning, the double-body: first, the method by which grotesque cycle of degrading (in to the grave) and renewal (womb) out of which regeneration (metamorphosis) takes place; second, the method of studying this cycle (Boje, 2004). An object says Bakhtin (1940/1968: 28) is "degraded according to the grotesque method: they send it down to the absolute bodily lower stratum, to the zone of the genital organs, the bodily grave, in order to be destroyed." As this occurs, it is also being renewed, regenerated, and so forth.

**Can we revive the grotesque realism of carnival, so that is more balanced with the spectacle?** To do so, we think the D's and the R's (Figure 1) have to be set in motion in the public square and market place, as well as in the *Academy of Management*. Can we suspend the hegemony of the spectacle and its counterfeit carnival, and recreate a more grotesquely real version?

Our thesis is that like New Orleans, the Academy is a theatre with more spectacle than carnival; both are part of the marketplace, but one distorted and twisted for lack of more forceful carnival. Neither provides even temporary liberation from our day-to-day spectacle; rank, hierarchy, privileges, and prohibitions prevail. Can we get back to the carnival of becoming, change, and renewal? It was here that corporate, state, and religious institutions embraced the metamorphosis. We think Michael Moore's and Morgan Spurlock's movies (*Fahrenheit 911* & *Supersize Me*) are record breaking box office hits because the people here are carnival deprived. Both present antenarratives charged with a bet that they are institution-reformative. They point to a carnival spirit that

can be reborn in New Orleans as well as the Academy. They return frank and free speech and theatrics of carnival to the marketplace. Please liberate us from Academy etiquette!

It is time for carnivalesque antenarratives! Carnivalesque antenarrative is a dynamic expression opposed to the ready-made, completed, and finished spectacle narratives. Antenarrative is about the pathos of change and renewal; they are those chaos-butterflies that create new weather patterns; their lightning is the comics' travesty, parody, humiliation, and discrowning of powerful institutions.

**Ambivalence** - The key concept stressed in Bakhtin (1940/1968) is ambivalence. Our antenarrative is that by regenerating ambivalence the carnival that has been so squelched can be revived, lest it extinguish and expire all together. The antenarrative humor we are suggesting is about ambivalence, not mockery. There are times when both Spurlock and Moore are mocking, and loose ambivalence. Carnival laughter is ambivalent, not bare negation. There is a difference that needs to be sorted out between ambivalent deriding and mockery. When mockery is so abusive it no longer revives and renews, it is not metamorphic; Boje's studies of Nike (1998, 1999), as opposed to the more metamorphic ones about Disney (1995) and McDonald's (2004) are examples. And for New Orleans, can we laugh ambivalently at ourselves and at our Academy? Bakhtin (1940/1968: 14) for example, writes about the "*Grammatical Virgil Maro*" a parody of the "scholarly wisdom and of the scientific methods" of the early 'Middle Ages'.

Let us be irreverent in an ambivalent way in the Academy session, here in the New Orleans marketplace, and revive the dying carnival. Let more grotesque parodies mingle with serious frank satire in a space where carnival is reborn.

But, also, let us not forget that Bakhtin is criticized for overlooking the more violent aspects of carnival. Let us enter the belly of the beast. In New Orleans, there is more flashing going on than metamorphosis. It is more spectacle than carnival.

Photo 2 (grotesque dude at right) is in response to Ken's Ehrensals' presentation; as the tag line says "On Mardi Gras day, people dress up in their favorite costume - there's no particular theme or consistency to it all - some costumes are funny; some are sexy; and others, well, others are simply beyond description."<sup>2</sup>



**What do you think of when you think of New Orleans?** We think of wearing purple, green, and gold strings of beads; people drinking on the streets... We may also think

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<sup>2</sup> Tag line from <http://www.icorp.net/carnival/madness.htm> Image source <http://www.icorp.net/carnival/rpic/poleman00s.jpg>

about the carnival, the Mardi Gras, the French Quarter, the Jazz, and the Creole and Cajun cultural influences, not to mention Voodoo and witchcraft. The spectacle of advertising has made carnival a featured attraction.

We are told: “Arguably, the biggest draw of Mardi Gras isn't the mystique associated with the pomp and circumstance of parades, Krewes, and tradition - it's the public spectacle of debauchery and deviance which covers the city like a beer-soaked fishnet stocking.”<sup>3</sup> Krewes are private social clubs with restrictive membership policies.

Let us enter the belly of the beast and get reborn in the womb of renewal, in the marketplace, where “the absolute lower stratus is always laughing” (Bakhtin, 1940/1968: 22). Let’s do a Situationist *dérive* and see if we can find some of the “grotesque carnival” (p. 22) that is a regenerating force of metamorphosis.

### Some Carnival History

New Orleans Mardi Gras, is a French version of Carnival; it was first celebrated in New Orleans in 1827; The first parade was staged in 1837 and contained only one float.



*Carnival New Orleans*, like more ancient ones, is set some time before Catholic lent (from Ash Wednesday to Easter). The 2005 parade schedule is from Jan 1 to Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras day; third Tuesday in Feb) Feb 8. Carnival was a way for Protestants to party and eat red meat. On a March 19<sup>th</sup>, Grace Ann and I went on St. Joseph’s Day (in 2005 it is celebrated mar 16-21<sup>st</sup>); it was brought to New Orleans by Sicilian immigrants. The tradition of building the altar to St. Joseph began as far back as the Middle Ages.

Since 1872, there is one day of carnival, when Rex, *King of the Carnival*,<sup>4</sup> (see photo above) receives the keys to New Orleans and rules for the day. There is during carnival season a space for abandon, for costumes, floats, drunkenness, and flashing; yet we do not find this to be any effective means of metamorphosis of institutions.

This carnivalesque time of street theatre, is something highly relevant to management and organization studies. This is more what Best and Kellner (1997) and Debord (1967) call a bureaucratic spectacle. It is a time when many businesses profit: hotels, bars, casinos, beads and costume suppliers, to name a few. And the many social clubs that put on the festivities work in organized bureaucratic fashion most of the year, to put on the event where bureaucracy is temporarily abandoned to designated carnival time. But, this is quite a narrow definition of carnival.

<sup>3</sup> Quote from <http://www.icorp.net/carnival/madr1.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Image of Rex source <http://www.rexorganization.com/parade.htm>

## What is Carnavalesque?

Carnavalesque is the use of theatrics to face off with power via satire and parody, and invite spectators to a new reading of the spectacle of global capitalism. The carnivalesque can be grotesque, violent or quite peaceful (Boje, 2001).<sup>5</sup>

Sorting out the message, in the midst of media dominated by spectacle advertising, infotainment, and purchased by transnational power, is the point of this presentation. For Mikhail Bakhtin (1940/1968), then Julia Kristeva (1981), the carnival is the theatrics of rant and madness seeing to repair the separation of worker from consumer. Yet, we do not find this kind of carnival in New Orleans nor in the Academy. We do not see New Orleans Carnival as an occupation of the streets in which the symbols and ideals of authority are subverted and satirized with irony



### Carnival Mask<sup>6</sup>

Carnival is thought to be a theatre situation in which people are encouraged to take temporary leave of their sanity, and engage in the grotesque excesses of humanity. But, we contend this is not the same as grotesque realism that Bakhtin as well as Rabelais had in mind. It is more of a case of a carnival domesticated by spectacle. It is not a phenomena of transformation or some unfinished metamorphosis of death and rebirth centered in ambivalence (Bakhtin, 1940/1968: 24).

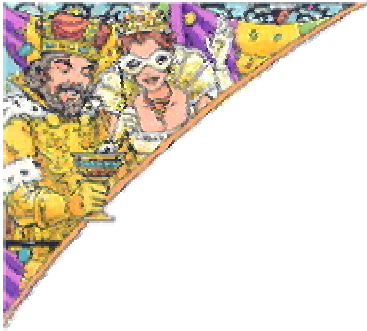
The carnival mask, according to Bakhtin (1940/1968: 40) “is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery, and familiar nicknames.” Now there are just nicknames.

As one *New Orleans Carnival* promotional site put it “The name carnival is derived from the Latin *Caro, Carnis*, flesh, and *vale*, farewell (according to Ducange, from the Latin denomination of the feasts of the Middle Ages, *carnis levamen*, solace of the flesh), because at that time people took leave of flesh.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, the life force of grotesque realism is no where to be found in this contemporary copy of a copy, whose original is virtually unknown today.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.zianet.com/boje/1/pages/carnival.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Mask image source <http://www.mardigrasday.com/nws-common/mardigras/products/94159.jpg>

<sup>7</sup> <http://carnivalneworleans.com/history.htm>



Carnival is just a release from spectacle: time is a reason to dress up, to throw beads, to ride on a flat-bed truck, and an excuse to drink enormous quantities of distilled spirits, and even expose parts of the body in public. A pseudo King is elected, but it is no longer a theatric discrowning of any “real” one.

Carnival is more than this sense of abandon of social norms in one season of the year, or in the French Quarter streets, the rest of the year. It is a time for parody, a time to face off with power, and engage in satire. But, this does not happen here.

**This has relevance to the Academy.** First, it is grotesque realism that oints out the necessity to change. Second, “for this reason great changes even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain consciousness that prepares the way” (Bakhtin, 1940/1968: 49). The grotesque confronts our concept of being human and social.

We think for most of us, carnival is about parades, people in masks and costume, elaborate floats, all the colored beads people wear, drinking in the streets, and all that jazz. And the connections of Carnival to Judeo-Christian are somewhat tenuous; the Dionysian spirit is a time for drinking games and tom foolery of college co-eds and tourists; it is just not very metamorphic. We can contrast the advertised image of New Orleans with its grotesque reality.<sup>8</sup>

If you're a woman, be warned. If you go into the French Quarter at night after a parade, many men are there just to see the sleazy stuff they saw on the news or the internet ... and often assume every woman there wants to be part of the frenzy. We look forward to the day people will again understand, appreciate, and experience the magic of Mardi Gras!

In short, it is street theatre, but it is accomplished to sell stuff. Is it also Mardi Gras tradition to showcase flashing women and drunken behavior?<sup>9</sup> This is a part of the carnivalesque that our panel member Ken Ehrensall has been researching for several years; I will let him comment on that. I can say that web sites advertise that “on Bourbon Street ... women are offered beads to bare their breasts to the crowd.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/quartermardi.html#breasts>

<sup>9</sup> Symbol source <http://www.mardigrasunmasked.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/quartermardi.html#breasts>

The New Orleans parade includes Bacchus, Zulu, and the Mardi Gras Indians (called “black Mardi Gras”). People apparently go to New Orleans to participate as spectators and sometimes as actors in the carnivalesque action, to take a step on the wild side. They expect what Bob Gephart Jr. calls “safe risk” a feeling of carnival, but as Ehrensall argues in his ethnographic study, the police are available to make sure drunks and pan handlers do not ruin the tourists’ good time, nor the business of New Orleans, to extract tourist dollars. Indeed the police are known for their efficient system of pulling troublesome drunks out of the street theatre atmosphere, arresting, booking, and carting them away to Central Lock Up.

Respect the police! These guys are overworked during Carnival. They are the world's best at crowd control, and during Mardi Gras they have to be tolerant of usually unacceptable behavior. Long shifts, Parade Duty, drunks, traffic accidents, lost kids, fights, rowdy crowds, nuisance complaints and a myriad of other incidents keep them busy 24 hours a days. If an officer tells you to do something...cooperate!<sup>11</sup>

**Can we find any remnants of a more Rabelaisian Carnival in New Orleans?**

Table 1 is a brief deconstruction of one history of the carnivalesque side of New Orleans. Surfing about, we think it is fairly representative of scores of such histories that are use to attract conventions and tourists to New Orleans.

**Table 1: Deconstruction of a Carnival History text<sup>12</sup>**

| The History   | The Deconstructive Reading   |
|---|--|
| <p>1. The French in New Orleans were having private masked balls and parties in 1718. When the Spanish government took over, parties and street dancing were banned. It wasn't until 1827, when Americans were in power, that the right to party in mask was restored --I love America!</p> | <p>1. By 1718, the Grotesque Carnival was already overpowered by the advent of Modernity. The Spanish taking the masks away is just one more degeneration of carnival.</p> |

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/mardi1.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/history.html>

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|---|--|
| <p>2. During the 1850's, the city's elite and their elegant Mardi Gras parties were quite a contrast to the wild partying and near-rioting in the streets. It was soon clear that all celebrations were in danger of facing another ban. In 1857, a group of men formed a secret society called the Mystick Krewe of Comus. They knew that Mardi Gras could be preserved with planning, organization, and management of the celebrations. Comus planned the first parade around a theme and used flambeauxs to light the procession. The Krewe of Rex formed in 1872 -- principally to entertain the visiting Grand Duke Alexis Romanoff of Russia.</p> | <p>2. Here we see that carnival had lost its force as regenerative metamorphosis of society. There was separating from parties of the elite and those of the common class.</p> <p>When the Krewes organized, they managed and orchestrated the production and discipline of the carnival.</p> <p>When Rex becomes crowned king it is no longer a comic discrowning of some "real" public personage.</p>                    |
| <p>3. New Orleanians have since formed a lot of secret societies that have served many charitable and social functions. They often help unite the city with their parade's political themes.</p>  | <p>3. Doing public service projects is also being installed into the Academy of Management. Like New Orleans Carnival, the Academy unites political themes, and avoids other ones.</p>   |
| <p>4. In 1877, after a brief interruption from the Civil War and the unrest that followed, the Krewe of Momus held a parade with the theme "Hades, a Dream of Momus" to ridicule President Grant and his Administration. During the Persian Gulf War, the theme for many parades and costumes was patriotism. In order to catch Mardi Gras throws, many parade-goers fashioned nets with a cardboard face of Sadam Hussein saying "Hit Me!" Mardi Gras is pretty sassy, too!</p>  | <p>4. Note: this is the first instance in the history narrative, where there is some glimmer of ancient carnival laughter. Yet, but the time the Persian Gulf War and those that have followed since the second Bush took office, there is more spectacle flag waving than there is carnivalesque speaking back to power. Power is no longer brought back to earth; which in our view is a dangerous state of affairs.</p> |

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| <p>5. Mardi Gras can even poke fun at itself. The blacks of New Orleans mocked the snobbishness and exclusivity of Rex with their own parade. In 1909, William Storey wore an old tin can for a crown instead of the more elaborate crown Rex used. William was crowned "King Zulu" that year, and was proceeded by "Provident Prince" and the "Big Shot of Africa." Donning black face and white eyes is another irresistible pun of the Zulu Social Aid &amp; Pleasure Club. Zulu's parade would meander from barroom to the barroom in junky cars and wagons instead of floats. If you wanted to catch the start of the parade, you had to find the bar that was extending hospitality to King Zulu.</p> | <p>5. Note: this is the second instance in the historical narrative where carnival laughter is used for social change.</p> <p>There appears to be between the various social organizations of New Orleans Carnival, a sort of carnivalesque humor, poking fun at each other.</p> |
| <p>6. This Krewe didn't establish a parade route until recently. Today, Zulu, with its beautiful modern floats, is one of the more popular parades of the season! They are known for their unique, hand-decorated coconut throws. Only a fortunate few are lucky enough to get those!</p>   | <p>6. More likely you will find the plastic varieties of throws. And, in some parts of the French Quarter, there is a tit-for-tat expected.</p>  |
| <p>7. Most Mardi Gras Krewes developed from private social clubs that have restrictive membership policies. Since all of these parade organizations are completely funded by its members, we call it the "Greatest Free Show on Earth"!</p>   | <p>7. More accurately, there is the illusion of liberatory independence</p>  |

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|--|---|
| <p>8. However, in 1991, the New Orleans City Council introduced a parade organization anti-discrimination ordinance; As a result; some of the oldest private clubs; Momus; Comus and Proteus, no longer parade the streets. (Comus is returning year 2000.) The most recently developed parade organizations are open and not secretive: Endymion, Bacchus, Zulu, and some Metairie parades feature superstars on their floats -- and all take place within the few days before Mardi Gras. Don't miss them!</p> | <p>8. The City it seems can not tolerate secretive parade organizations</p> <p>Superstars is one step closer to <i>Society of the Spectacle</i></p> |
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Our deconstructive analysis of the history text in Table 1 suggests very few examples of ancient carnival or the metamorphosis of degeneration and regeneration. In sections 4 and 5 of the table there are glimpses of the ancient impulses. But in the others, spectacle overshadows carnival.

### Conclusions

In Middle Age and Renaissance, the grotesque images are clearly ugly, hideous, monsters. There was a sense of freedom to speak back to power (within some limits). Up the Renaissance, in Lyon and other European cities, people spent a month to three months in carnival time. *New Orleans Carnival*, like the ancient ones, is a longer period, but a side show in the French Quarter that occurs throughout the year. There is more burlesque than grotesque realism there.

Other than (#4) parodies of President Grant and (#5) Krewes parodying each other, there is not much happening.

One of the bits of grotesque realism that one sees in New Orleans (and so many other U.S. cities) is the homeless clowns with their red cheeks and noses, their open mouths, and their hand outstretched for donations. These are grotesque clowns in the throes of death, but without much renewal. They do the eating, drinking, and defecating, but without the power of renewal. The grotesque homeless clown has become part of the lower social stratum, a ubiquitous, yet invisible caste on the streets of America.

Let us send *Academy of Management* and *New Orleans Carnival* down into the absolute bodily lower stratum, into Bakhtin's "zone of genital organs, the bodily grave, in order to be destroyed: (1940/1968: 28) and then in that womb, reborn.

Carnival has a history, one rooted in grotesque realism. Both spectacles (*Academy* and *New Orleans*) are "plastic comic art" (Bakhtin, 1940/1968: 30-31), the dark side of the spectacle (Best & Kellner, 1997), part of the postmodern war spectacle, the homeless

spectacle, the spectacle of plasticity (all those beads). These spectacles camouflage and otherwise mask the grotesque realism.

We conclude that both spectacles need to have a close encounter with grotesque imagery, and learn a bit of Grotesque Methodology (Boje, 2004; Boje & Cai, 2004).

It is time to jump start the cycle of metamorphosis, to begin anew the cycle of fertility and generativity, resonating in encounters with grotesque images. Carnival was at one time a way to ground, bring down to earth, the legitimating order.

This was some real actionable knowledge generation. It was done by ripping off the romantic mask and with close encounters with the ambivalent laughter that pierced plasticity and lofty pretense. It was through ancient carnival that the social system reterritorialized and deterritorialized (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

In sum, there is grotesque realism all about us; there are even traces of grotesque realism in *Academy* and *New Orleans Carnival*. It is up to us to rekindle and revitalize carnival to be an effective force of metamorphosis. We do not need any more plastic beads. That is the antenarrative story we have for you today.

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