

People – Masks – Europe
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House of Arts and Literature

Carnival King of Europe: the film

The film *Carnival King of Europe* (DVD, Italy, 2009, 22 mins.), authored by prize-winning Italian filmmaker Michele Trentini in conjunction with Giovanni Kezich as anthropologist-playwright, has been the result of over three years of consistent joint efforts led by the Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina, the “Museum of Folkways of Trentino”, an important ethnographic institution of the Eastern Italian Alps, which has embraced another four European countries – France, Croatia, Bulgaria, Macedonia – within the framework of a project directly funded by the Cultural Department of the European Union in Bruxelles. *Carnival King of Europe* produced as a DVD and distributed within the network of contacts activated by the project, has won international acclaim having been awarded the Grand Prize for Scientific Film of the Kyoto University Museum in 2009.

Behind the making of the film, there has been fieldwork carried out in five countries, museum research, the making of a website www.carnivalkingofeurope.it, an itinerant exhibition that has travelled from Italy to the Southern Balkans (San Michele all’Adige, Zagreb, Sofia, Skopje), and a number of other activities that were carried out under the spell of a growing awareness of the common European identity which invariably comes to the surface and is brought into play wherever these ancient rituals are performed.

The film, which contains clips from some 30 fieldwork locations, is based on the elementary observation that most European carnivals and/or winter masquerades, seem to draw on the same fundamental imagery as far as their characters and masks, headgear and paraphernalia are concerned. And, what is even more significant, these classes of characters and objects are brought into play following a specific order of appearance, which is generally the same everywhere, so as to suggest that some sort of unwritten “script”, the underlying structure of a basic hidden liturgy, is actually organizing the ritual from within.

Almost universally, in fact, the season of the winter masquerades, or the single masquerade itself, is opened by frightful figures, clad in sheepskins, clanging heavy cowbells, as if a sort of “wild flock” was suddenly taking hold of the village scene. In the second phase, more domesticated dancing or trotting figures appear, which are usually unmasked and silent, dressed in white and wearing a long conical hat, topped by a tail of

coloured ribbons. These are sober, priestly figures, who witness the ceremonial part of the ritual, which usually involves a mock-wedding, ritual plowing and sowing, and the spelling out of good wishes, in the context of a long tour of the village, from house to house or hamlet to hamlet. Then there follows the third part, that of buffooneries of every description, with clownish figures of caricaturized old people and pagliacci, drag queens, devils and zombies coming to the front, to enact the general havoc of the “world-turned-upside-down”, which is usually associated with carnival. Finally, almost invariably, a personification of carnival – be it a strawman, an “old woman”, a bear, a ceremonial tree or whatnot - is captured, sentenced to death, executed, and most typically turned into a burning pyre. This is the epilogue.

The film aims at showing the inner consistency of such a structure in three acts plus one epilogue, by putting together, with a fine work of cutting and in absence of any commentary, relevant bits of the masquerades from the four corners of Europe: from the Balkans to Iberia, from the Alps to England.

European history and European culture have been often and still are represented as the sum total of a number of very different, and often irreconcilable, national identities. Our work on Carnival begins to challenge this view, and to show that it is not necessarily so, and it certainly was not so throughout long periods of the European past.

So, besides the infinitely debatable and cumbersome colonial legacies of Europe, and the manifold pangs of its nations and blocs throughout the past two centuries, new grounds can be found today to show that its peoples, for most of their history, shared the very same system of ancient agrarian beliefs, the same religion of old, the same rituals.

That this can be still shown today, 15 hundred years after Europe’s final demise of its own original political unity under Rome, is an astonishing fact that shows how much good work there is still to be done within the scope of some unbiased comparative ethnographic framework.

Where and how will the Hungarian Buso fit in the picture? This is an interesting question that we wish to try to give some answer to.

Giovanni Kezich

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