

# CARNIVAL KING OF EUROPE

A film by Giovanni Kezich & Michele Trentini



In addition, on this DVD:

- One day in Begnishte** (Macedonia)
- One day in Rukavac** (Croatia)
- One day in Chelnik** (Bulgaria)
- One day in Valfioriana** (Italy)
- The Bear Chase** (France)



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A film by Giovanni Kezich & Michele Trentini  
MUCGT 2009, 22'

Concept & texts: Giovanni Kezich  
Camerawork, sound & cutting: Michele Trentini



In addition, on this DVD:

**One day in Begnishte** (Macedonia)  
by Michele Trentini, MUCGT 2008, 7'

**One day in Rukavac** (Croatia)  
by Michele Trentini, MUCGT 2008, 11'

**One day in Chelnik** (Bulgaria)  
by Michele Trentini, MUCGT 2008, 13'

**One day in Valfloriana** (Italy)  
by Michele Trentini, MUCGT 2007, 14'

**The Bear Chase** (France)  
by Michele Trentini, MUCGT 2009, 7'

Organization: Antonella Mott

On the field: Zvezdana Antoš, Josip Barlek, Vladimir Bocev, Giovanni Kezich, Marie-Pascale Mallé, Igljika Mishkova, Antonella Mott, Cesare Poppi, Giuliana Sellan, Michele Trentini.

**Carnival King of Europe** is a project of the *Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina* of San Michele all'Adige (Trentino, Italy), entailing fieldwork, documentary film making, the staging of an itinerant exhibition, besides the organization of international conferences & seminars. The project aims at bringing into full light the important similarities that can be observed among specific aspects of Carnivals and winter fertility rituals across different areas of Europe. All relevant info on site [www.carnivalkingofeurope.it](http://www.carnivalkingofeurope.it). This DVD features the original and previously unreleased film materials which were collected in the course of field research.

Partners are:

*Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* of Marsiglia (France),  
*Etnografski Muzej* of Zagreb (Croatia),  
*Nacionalna Ustanova Muzej na Makedonija* of Skopje (Macedonia),  
*Etnografski Institut s Muzej* of Sofia (Bulgaria).

Iconography & editing: Antonella Mott

Artwork: Helene Lageder

Production: Antersass, Montecchio Maggiore (VI)

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«In many parts of Europe  
dancing or leaping high  
in the air are approved  
homeopathic modes of making  
the crops grow high».

Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*.  
*A study in Magic and Religion*, London,  
1922 (1976), p. 36.

"We may conjecture that the leaps from which the Sallii took their name were supposed to promote the growth of the crops by sympathetic magic; it cannot be without significance that in their hymns these dancing priests named, and probably invoked, Saturn, the god of sowing. We may surmise that the people in the streets, and especially farmers from the country, watched their dances with eager curiosity and prognosticated the height of the corn at the next harvest from the height of their leaps into the air. In some parts of Europe, especially in Germany and Austria, it is or was till lately customary to dance or leap high for the express purpose of making the crops grow correspondingly tall; the leaps are executed sometimes by the sower on the field, sometimes by other persons, at certain seasons, such as Candlemas and Walpurgis Night (the eve of May Day), but especially on Shrove Tuesday. Indeed in some places men used to assemble in bands for the purpose of thus fostering the growth of the crops by their leaps and antics. This was the case, for example, at Grub in the Swiss canton of the Grisons. The peasants there "assembled in some years, mostly at the time of the summer solstice, disguised themselves as maskers so as to be unrecognizable, armed themselves with weapons defensive and offensive, took every man a great club or cudgel, marched in a troop from one village to another, and executed high leaps and strange antics. They ran full tilt at each other, struck every man his fellow with all his might, so that the blow resounded, and clashed their great staves and cudgels. These foolish pranks they played from a superstitious notion, that their corn would thrive the better." These Swiss *Stopfer* correspond exactly to the Roman *Sallii*, if my view of that ancient Italian priesthood is correct."

Sir James Frazer, *Commentary on Ovid's Fasti* (1931),  
Loeb Classical Library, Oxford, 1931, pp. 402-403.

## COMPARING MASQUERADES, REVEALING EUROPE

When Sir James Frazer, the Scottish anthropologist, published the twelve volumes of the final version of *The Golden Bough* between 1906 and 1915, the study of popular culture in the context of the cultural climate of the age was framed within the nationalist discourses which would soon become responsible for the greatest carnage ever to be experienced in human history. It was both thought and wilfully implemented – in Serbia as much as in Moldova, in the Swiss Cantons as much as in Sicily, in Finland as much as in Saxony notwithstanding of course local nuances – that the *Volksgeist*, «the spirit of the people» expressed in the practices, representations and beliefs of popular culture was the embodiment of the specific, exclusive distinctiveness of a given sociocultural formation vis-à-vis all others. Each people who could demonstrate to possess a unique and peculiar cultural specificity was therefore entitled to their own State national formation.

Frazer's work was immediately successful but also as quickly forgotten when not altogether deliberately set aside by the post-First World War developments of contemporary anthropology. This comes as no wonder in that, amongst other factors, the triumph of Nationalism across Europe had demonstrated that Frazer's fundamental thesis was, in the facts, untenable. Frazer held fast to the idea of the existence of a structural continuity of themes, motifs and functions in the symbolical practices as well as in the corresponding ritual liturgies throughout the European Continent and – following successive generalizing analytical steps – well beyond it. This idea of a common rootedness of popular culture found its *nemesis* in the general onslaught and universal butchery which wrote the statutes of the specificity and distinctiveness of each national formation with the blood of the Other.



Kukeri, Kabile,  
Bulgaria, 1985.

*Carnival King of Europe* means, instead, to suggest once again the existence of fundamental continuities in the forms of rural civilization across Europe by looking closely to the ritual expressions of common concerns and shared forms of representation. The various expressions of the form of management and control over the production and reproduction of humans, animals and plants alike to be recorded from the Balkans to the Iberian peninsula can be understood – as transformations of recurrent and redundant themes. Winter masquerades, in particular, constitute an attempt at imposing an arbitrary but by the same token certain and mandatory cultural order over the vagaries and devastating irregularities of natural cycles. All this – it is suggested – may have found its first expression as part of the Neolithic revolution, when the development of the material culture related to farming and animal husbandry called for the elaboration of a corresponding set of expressive practices.

In this context pastoral and agrarian symbolic references appear to constitute the central concern of masquerading, alongside powerful references to the inchoate represented by Spirit, Monsters and Wild Characters of all shapes and descriptions. These are the «powers of the Wild», the undisciplined and yet crucial energies which we, the humans, need to appease, blandish and domesticate till when – if possible – we will be able finally to lure in and harness to plough and harrow.

Such spatial and temporal/historical *continuum* is what the research team with which we had the pleasure to work in the last two years set off to highlight and focus upon. Today we are pleased to present the preliminary results of our work to the same audience which made our research possible through the generous support of

the European Union. Those are the same audiences with which we intend to interact as a first step towards the validation – or less – of our working hypothesis.

We live nowadays in an epochal juncture whereby people's movements and migrations appear to instigate the fear of the Un-like. All too often Governmental responses to such dynamics fall back onto forms of anachronistic national protectionism whose impotence and count-productiveness is under everybody's eyes. Ninety years after the end of the First World War, *Carnival King of Europe* purports to be a counterpoint to the menacing, impractical and regressive revival calls for a kind of «integration» which runs the risk of being – instead – assimilation and obedience to the standards of One – and One Only – form of civilization.

The message of *Carnival King of Europe* is that European integration has already been implemented at the level of popular culture. It is here that the people of Europe have long since played the same kind of music as members of an orchestra playing an harmonious, ever changing and ever fascinating sort of music. This music is fine precisely because each musician plays her and his unique, exclusive and matchless instrument in tune with all others.

Cesare Poppi



Romeno, Trentino,  
Carnival 1960.

## CARNIVAL KING OF EUROPE

In the heart of winter, when the earth rests and the local communities are locked within themselves waiting for the awakening of vegetation, a *beneficial invasion of spirits* breaks into the monotony of days, sets fire to the nights and throws the villages into havoc. In the course of colourful and noisy processions that embrace the whole community, these spirits are represented by masked characters or *mummers* that visit every household begging for eggs and foodstuffs. They are the spirits of the flock and the woodland, the occult dormant forces of nature, the ancestors that return, in the form of frightful, powerful and prodigious beings.

So, the long winters of European peasant communities are interrupted by a series of spontaneous ceremonials, as ancient as they are apparently incomprehensible. Of these, our «Carnival» is surely the better known: a sudden explosion of noises, colours and emotions, which hides a deep ritual and symbolic core, very hard to decipher.

In the heart of winter, some very ancient rituals are still performed throughout Europe to secure prosperity and good harvests.

Such rituals are the original core of what is today commonly known as «Carnival»

This film is been made based on the assumption that Carnival makes use of the same characters and themes cast in the same overall dramatic structure all over Europe, from Iberia to the Balkans, from Central Europe to the Mediterranean.

In this sense, Carnival's kingdom of ephemeral misrule – only in appearance wild, disorderly and ephemeral – can be said to be one of the most widespread and durable throughout European history, and Carnival himself a veritable «King of Europe».

The hypothesis that underlies this exhibition lays upon the assessment that the winter masquerades of European peoples – that is «Carnival» proper plus many other entwined rituals that take place in Europe from Halloween down to the beginning of Spring – draw their inspiration from a *common ceremonial imagery*, and are structured in a very similar way. Characters, actions and settings of these rituals are thus found to be almost identical, so as to reveal the structure of the same ancient liturgy, of the very same sacred drama.

In this ceremonial pantomime, which almost always has a mock-wedding at its core, so as to put forward the idea of the union of the sexes as an explicit metaphor of the idea of fertility, it is possible to recognize *three distinct and separate phases*, which are found to maintain their ordered sequence wherever the ritual has preserved in time some segmented structure of its own.

From Iberia to the Balkans, from the Pyrenees to the Alps, from the Italian peninsula to Central Europe, each one of these phases can be recognized by the same signals and the same symbols, which are indelible traces of the ancient liturgy which lays at the origin of these rituals.

So, Carnival's own Kingdom appears to be only superficially uproarious and ephemeral, and can be considered instead one of the more extended and longer lasting of the history of the continent of Europe so that, in this particular perspective, Carnival itself can be taken to be a true «King of Europe».

New research will make possible new comparisons among the various areas of the continent, so as to shed some light on the origins of this ceremonial complex and the reasons of its millennial historical progress.



*Kukeri in village Stralja, Bulgaria, 1921.*



*Mummers in village Sušica, Bulgaria, 1939.*

## ACT I (of Fear)



Rowdy and rumbustious demonic invaders, supernatural, semi-human, ancestral...  
From the frightening hideous herd of winter demons to the forebears' auspicious hope for quickening who return to reawaken men and nature.

*Matòcio, Valfioriana, Trentino, 1960 ca.*

*A mummers' fight in village Dabene, Bulgaria, 1939.*



It is the sound of cowbells worn around the waist of the mummers, that announces the time of ritual and calls upon Nature to awake, when a disorderly and rather frightful flock from the great outbacks of the mountains and the woodlands, takes hold of the village. Symbols of a transhumant pastoral condition that comes



*The «old folks»  
of village Elovdol,  
Bulgaria.*

before, and is opposed to, that of the peasant settler, the bell-shakers that march on shaking their waist in such a way as to make the maximum of noise, are pastoral demons – i.e. the transfiguration of wild birds, boars, goats, rams and oxen – as well as returning ancestors. The costumes and masks of these characters can greatly vary in between an animal, monster-like and a human extreme, so that they can be seen alternatively as beasts, devils, wayward ancestors, «wild men of the wood» or as the ageing bachelors that often lurk in the recesses of the village webs of kinship.



*Survakari,  
International Festival of  
Masquerades Surva,  
Pernik, Bulgaria,  
28th January, 2006.*

*Mechkar (bear-man),  
Prilep, Macedonia,  
1996.*



## INTERLUDE

(the Quest)

*From collecting the eggs  
from every house and every hamlet,  
to the moveable feast  
which involves all.*

The invasion is now complete, the mysterious bell-shaking figures have taken hold of the village. And what do they do? They go knocking at every door, asking for an offer: of food – eggs above all – but also of sweets, sausages and wine, which can be consumed on the spot or rather taken away, possibly on the back of a donkey. Money offers are not disregarded. In exchange, the mummers ensure to the inhabitants of the house prosperity and fortune for the year to come.



*Chelnik,  
17th February 2008.*

*Rukavac,  
20th January 2008.*

*Saint Oyen,  
21st February 2009.*



## ACT II (the Ceremony)

Once the impact of the monster figures has faded out, there sets in a ceremonial phase proper, whose minister are hooded, silent dancers, which are referred to in a variety of ways, but usually wearing as a very distinctive sign a tall mitre shaped as a cone adorned with flowers and long ribbons. The office and specific duty of such hooded mummers, as they dance in ample anticlockwise circles, is to bear witness to the wedding ceremony, which is about to follow. In fact, at the core of the ritual cortege, a groom and a bride – usually a man-in-drag – make their appearance. This mock-wedding is often followed by mock-ploughing, with the plough pulled by two yoked mummers on the village main square. Symbolic harrowing, sowing and the uttering of a ritual blessing are often made to follow. The linkage of the nuptial theme to that of ploughing, which are often found at the core of the ceremony, implies some symbolic connection between human sexuality and the fecundity of the earth, which ploughing itself stimulates and masters.

1. Hooded Harlequins and merry-go-rounds: the mock-wedding.
2. Ploughing the square, sowing the seeds.



Arlechini, Valfloriana, Trentino, 1960 ca.



The spósi (Bride and Groom) and the bèle (Best Man and Bridesmaid), Carnival of Valfloriana, 1960 ca.



Arlechini, Valfloriana, Trentino, 1960 ca.



Kukeri ploughing, Kukeri Festival, Jambol, Bulgaria, 16th February, 2008.



Kukeri sowing, Kukeri Festival, Jambol, Bulgaria, 16th February, 2008.

Kukeri, Kukeri Festival,  
Jambol, Bulgaria,  
16th February, 2008.



Kukeri, International Festival of  
Masquerades Surva, Pernik, Bulgaria,  
28th January, 2006.



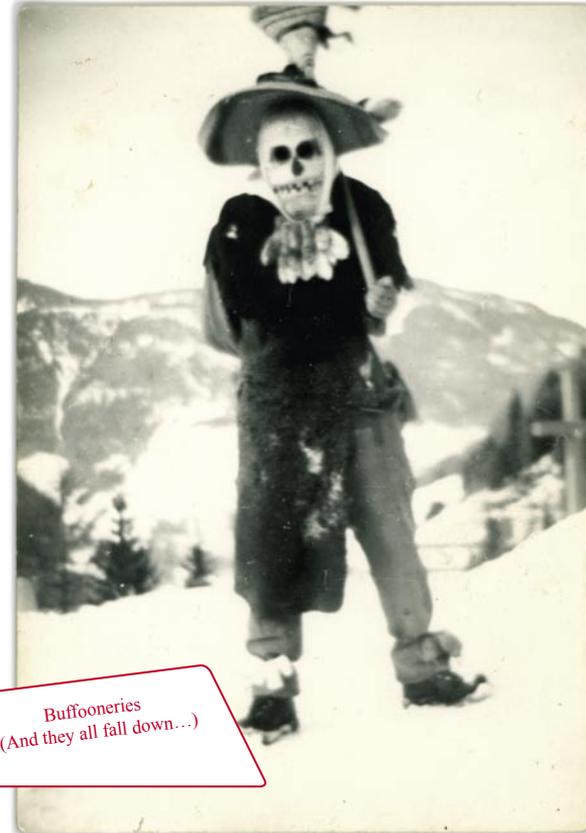
Lachè of village Romeno, Coredò,  
Trentino, Carnival 2008.



Bufón, Soraga, Trentino,  
5th February, 2008, Shrove Tuesday.

## ACT III

(of Laughter and Death)



Buffooneries  
(And they all fall down...)

Carnival  
of Valfloriana,  
Trentino, 1960 ca.

At the end of the ceremony, the stage is open to the clownish figures that feature in the last section of the cortege. Commonly widespread, at this point, is the satirical representation of an exaggerated peasant poverty, made of caricature characters, lecherous and disgusting: ugly old women, crippled old men, drunken, un-savoury, bad... Some other specific characters are often featured: most notably a Bear with the Bear-tamer, the Hobby-horse, the

Camel... Also, we find an assorted parades gypsies, nurses, doctors, nazi-soldiers, non-descript «blacks»... These ugly masks stage scatological and lewd jokes, as well as short pantomimes that directly involve the onlookers, often engaging them in rough fights that end on the bare pavement.

*Bear and Bear-tamer, Kukeri Festival, Jambol, Bulgaria, 16th February, 2008.*



*Kukeri Festival, Jambol, Bulgaria, 16th February, 2008.*



*Camel with Camel-driver, Kukeri Festival, Jambol, Bulgaria, 16th February, 2008.*



*Romeno, Trentino, 5th February, 2008, Shrove Tuesday.*



*Mèscre a burt, Soraga, Trentino, 5th February, 2008, Shrove Tuesday.*



*Horse with Rider, Kukeri Festival, Jambol, Bulgaria, 16th February, 2008.*

## EPILOGUE

A great bonfire in the vicinity of the village is usually the final act of purification that says goodbye to Carnival. Several different symbolic meanings are made to converge into this act, in its various locations: to «burn the Old woman», to «burn the Winter away», to «call upon March»... Thus, all of a sudden and a little cruelly, there ends the time given to the performance of this ancient ritual and one returns, with Ash Wednesday's ashes, in the main course of ordinary time, which is disciplined by the Christian calendar.

Burning the old,  
burning the winter...



Grauno, Trentino,  
28th February, 2006.

## ONE DAY IN BEGNIShte

Begnishte, Tikveš  
Macedonia

At dawn on January 14th, which marks the New Year in the old Julian Calendar, the village of Begnishte, 100 kms. south of Skopje, experiences the invasion of the *Djolomari*, bearded and hooded bell-shakers, armed with clubs and wooden swords, accompanied by an old woman and followed by some clowns. The cortege which is thus formed visits each of the houses of the village where, in exchange for the ringing of the bells and the chanting of good wishes, it collects offerings in cash or wine, flour, sweets or fruits, which are loaded on a little donkey that follows suit. At the end of the day, the party of begging mummers gathers in the central open space of the village, where rampaging has been going on throughout the day, for a sequel of wilder and wilder round dances. The focus of such merry-go-rounds is a white-robed «Bride» (always a man-in-drag) with whom lewd, very basic sexual mimics are carried out. Very deeply felt among the villagers is the belief in the beneficial character of this ritual, which is supposed to purify the world and capture the energy for its fruitful continuation.

Round dance,  
14th January, 2007.





Bride,  
14th January, 2007.



A donkey and his  
driver go begging,  
14th January, 2007.



The Old Woman,  
14th January, 2007.



Djolomar,  
14th January, 2007.



Djolomari,  
14th January, 2007.

Djolomari, 1998.



# ONE DAY IN RUKAVAC

Rukavac, Primorsko Goranska  
Croatia

The modern village companies of the *Zvončari*, that is the «bell-shakers», that once used to be known as the «*Stari*», the «Old ones», began to emerge around the turn of the XIX century. To that age we must also refer the idea of their costumes, which are often one third pastoral (cow-bells, mantles of fleece, axes and clubs...), one third carnevalesque and ceremonial (flowered hats), and one third maritime (the blue and white striped shirts of the Kvarner sailors). As of today, no less than 40 different groups are busy throughout the time of Carnival – which is signalled by a life-size dummy called «*Pust*» hanged to a pole near the entrance to the village. These groups engage in lengthy walkabouts that embrace even the smallest hamlets of the surrounding area. In each one of the villages which are visited, the bell-shaking invaders, lead by a sort of herald which keeps hold of long and leafy bamboo cane, and followed by a small brass band, draw next to each other and gather with great intensity in a spiral that climaxes in a very tight knot of bodies, which suddenly breaks loose, to give way to a village festival proper, and the offering of food and drink to everyone.



*Zvončari, 20th January, 2008.*



*Zvončari,  
20th January, 2008.*

*Zvončar's hat,  
20th January, 2008.*



*A herald during the  
stay in a hamlet,  
20th January, 2008.*

*Zvončari on tour,  
20th January, 2008.*



Pust, «Šegavac»,  
20th January, 2008.

Zvončari on tour,  
20th January, 2008.



## ONE DAY IN CHELNIK

Chelnik, Tracia  
Bulgaria

The village of Chelnik near to Jambol, in the middle of the great plains of Thrace, partakes of the tradition of the *kukeri*, which is widespread in the whole of South-eastern Bulgaria, in connection to the Orthodox carnival. The *kukeri* are masked youth, completely disguised by a very elaborate costume, followed by some gypsy musicians and by a trail of clownish figures. They perform a tour of food collecting that embraces the whole of the village, from mid-morning to dusk. In each of the domestic courtyards which are visited, a dance and some simple rituals of good wish are performed, in exchange for wine, eggs, sweets, sausages, and other foodstuffs. At the end of the day the *kukeri* gather on the main square, where with a final merry-go-round they define a large ritual circle. Within the circle, a mock-wedding takes place, with a mock-priest in office (the «Bride» is generally a man). The wedding is followed by the ritual ploughing and the sowing of the square, with the plough pulled by the Bride herself, the clownish parturition of a doll or a live cat, and the uttering of a ritual formula of good wish, which is chanted by the Bride from the top of the upturned plough.



Kukeri,  
17th February, 2008.

Kukeri, mask,  
17th February, 2008.





*Kukeri, wedding,  
17th February, 2008.*



*Kukeri, nuptial cortege.  
From left: the Bride  
and Groom, the Priest,  
the music player,  
17th February, 2008.*



*Kukeri, plowing,  
17th February, 2008.*

*Kukeri. To the left, the Devil with  
his basket for collecting the eggs,  
17th February, 2008.*



*Kukeri, childbirth, 17th February, 2008.*

*Kukeri, 17th February, 2008.*

*The Bride and Groom, 17th February, 2008.*



# ONE DAY IN VALFLORIANA

Valfloriana, Trentino  
Italy

The traditional Carnival of Valfloriana takes place on the last Saturday before Lent, and takes the form of a very long tour of collection, which from mid-morning to the early evening embraces the ten or so hamlets in which the village is subdivided, from the top to the bottom of the valley. Three distinct types of figures are found in the cortege. To begin with, the masked *matòci* or *barbi* enter the scene, shouting and shaking the bell at their waist, being counteracted by small groups of villagers that engage with them in lively verbal *contrèst*. Then, accompanied by the music of a band of accordions, there follows the nuptial cortege proper, with the Bride and Groom, Best man and Bridesmaid, and a whole party of dancing white *arlechini*, with their typically high conical mitre. Finally, the *paiaci* stage their own sequel of silent burlesque pantomimes. This sequence of three different stages is repeated in the very same order in each one of the hamlets which are visited, where the entrance of the mummers is greeted with offering of wine, doughnuts and other foodstuffs.



Contrèst, Carnival 2006.



Arlechini,  
Carnival 2006.



Paiaci,  
Carnival 2006.



Matòcio, Carnival 2006.

Arlechini, Carnival 2008.

Paiaci, pantomime,  
Carnival 2006.



## THE BEAR CHASE

Arles sur Tech, Catalonia  
France

At Arles Sur Tech, in the French Catalonia, carnival is also announced by the appearance of a wild and frightful being, which is called the «Bear». At the end of the winter, in fact, the Bear enters the village harassing all peasants, engaging in fights with the hunters who have been sent to catch him, whilst he attempts at the virtue of fair Rosetta, impersonated by a man in drag, supposedly the wife of the leading *Trappeur*. At the end of the day, after a long display of fights and skirmishes, the chase gets to the main square, where the Bear, continuing the fight against those who want to have him harnessed, manages to rape fair Rosetta and to take her to his den. Yet at this point he is suddenly stopped by the hunters, who put him in chain and have him to sit down. Hence with wine and an hatchet's blade the Bear will be ceremonially «shaved», being thus forever turned into a human being.

*The Bear and the Hunters, Arles sur Tech, 1st February, 2009*





Museo degli Usi e Costumi  
della Gente Trentina

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