

Play and/as Carnival: RuNet in the Light of Bakhtin's Conception of Counterculture

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Abstract

The universal anthropological notion of “play” and the more specific historical phenomenon of “carnival” are of different categorial status; nevertheless they share some similar notions and characteristics: thus, both allow for temporal escapes from the normative restrictions and functional necessities of everyday life; both show a fascination for the adoption of foreign identities, for playing with masques etc.

In my paper I want to reflect on some dis/similarities between play and carnival in their relevance for the study of contemporary digital and network culture, relying on the concept of carnival as elaborated by the Russian theoretician Michail Bachtin.

Possible points of reference are his ideas of the grotesque body or of scatological humoresque discourses popular on the WWW in general and the Runet in particular. Of interest are likewise Bachtin's observations concerning „carnival as a play without a stage“, since in the interactive networked environments the formal borderlines which separate actors and spectators (or players and non-players) erode.

While the formal characteristics of carnival show quite some analogies to contemporary digital folk culture, Bachtin's axiological interpretation of carnival as a liberating, democratic practice opposing official hierarchies probably has to be modified. As illustrated by, for example, the obscene culture of the so-called “padonki” (“scumbags”), which got so extremely popular on the Runet, linguistic and literary norm violations do not necessarily stand in opposition to official power structures, but may fulfil functions of hedonistic pleasure within the official framework of homogenizing, centripetal and patriotic State discourses.