

# The Merry Mystery of the Maypole A Few Observations on the Role of the Comic Object in Religion and Culture

Izar Lunaček

*This article begins by analysing the maypole rituals in European folklore as a case study to make a point that it is arguably expandable to religious practice in general: that the humorous is intimately interwoven with the sacred and that the comic object is the most rudimentary type of a sacred entity. Carnavalesque or New Year's rituals, it is claimed, are characterized precisely by a temporary reign of the comic object, while their ending in the banishment or killing of the comical ruler open up a space for the emergence of a transcendent, wholly serious god. Frazer, Freud and Girard's theories of culture and religion are re-examined in the view of this assumption and a number of concrete rituals and mythologies from different cultures re-evaluated as a test of its consistency.*

**Keywords:** Philosophy of religion, comedy, folklore, comparative mythology, the maypole

Particularly within more archaic (tribal or popular) religious practices, rituals involving laughter and the element of comedy seem to form as subsistent a part of culture as their more serious counterparts. Historically, however, they have been faced with such patronizing dismissal that they are still nowhere near being granted the same gravity. Mikhail Bakhtin's ground-breaking account of medieval carnival as the heir to an ancient tradition of sacred mockery was in its time an honourable exception that set out to revive ritual laughter as "equally (or more) serious" to the more solemn forms of worship.<sup>1</sup> To begin to appreciate them on their own terms, comic rituals, the ones that not only worship but also mock their central idol at the same time, should be approached as more than mere secondary parodies or light-hearted versions of straightforward worship. If examined according to their own particular logic, they could perhaps prove independent of or even primary to that of serious devotion. In this essay, I will attempt to propose a particular conceptual interpretation of the relations at work between the merry congregation and their ridiculed idol that might be able to link religious mockery to "profane" forms of comedy but also, perhaps more

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin: *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 6. Recently peaking studies of the trickster archetypes seem to share a similar goal yet sometimes mystify the role of comic subversion in a way highly divergent from Bakhtin's healthy materialism. Since we are concerned here with comic *ritual* rather than comic myth we will only touch on the trickster themes occasionally and when appropriate in context.

importantly, to propose a privileged place for this odd, funny type of sanctity at the very core of humanity's symbolic forms.

Carnival rites from the Middle Ages to the present day often feature a comical temporary ruler that governs the upside-down world: sometimes a real man of flesh and blood (most frequently a tramp or a person deemed a "fool" by the community) and sometimes an oversized anthropomorphic doll.<sup>2</sup> We would, however, like to start our investigation with a more basic figure that has long presided over merry spring rituals in much of European folklore: the ubiquitous young tree known in English-speaking countries as "the maypole". Customs usually associated with the ritual erection of the maypole are not carnival as such (although Bakhtin would probably deem them carnivalesque), but their merry spirit as well as the ambivalent attitude of the community to the juvenile tree definitely fit the structure of comic worship. The basic form that the latter takes in the maypole rites will afford us an interesting starting point for a general interpretation of comic ritual.

Alongside others, the maypole rituals were covered extensively in several chapters of James Frazer's highly influential and today highly outdated *Golden Bough*.<sup>3</sup> While the *magnum opus* by one of the pioneers of comparative mythology might well have proved too dismissive of local context for modern ethnographic tastes, it is precisely this schematic approach that brings out certain general, formal and universal characteristics of comic rituals that have gone unnoticed in studies of isolated cases and should prove highly useful for a study centred on the most general conceptual form of the ritual.

### 1. *Mors victrix?*

The basic scenario of a general maypole ritual extractable from Frazer's accounts consists of the following elements: a group of worshippers march out of the village to the forest, they pick out a well-sized but still young tree, cut it down and bring its rootless trunk to the village square or other communal centre swept clean for the festivities.<sup>4</sup> There, often festooned with colourful ribbons, the maypole presides over the community during a limited period of festivity at the end of which it is brought down again, taken back out of the village and usually "buried" in one way or another. One of the most common methods is to throw the dead tree into a river whose flow carries the former festival king out of the territory of the community over which it had briefly presided.<sup>5</sup>

Frazer's interpretation of this whole set of actions was the worship of a "vegetation god" or a "tree spirit" whom the maypole supposedly embodies. The watery burial of the idol was supposedly aimed at assuring sufficient rainfall for the deity's domain

<sup>2</sup> Comp. Bakhtin, p. 197

<sup>3</sup> Particularly in the chapters "The Worship of Trees" and "The Killing of the Tree Spirit". We will be citing from the latest Oxford abridgement: James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough, a Study in Magic and Religion – A New Abridgement from the Second and Third Editions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 82–97 and pp. 273–299.

<sup>4</sup> Comp. Frazer, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> See examples in *ibid*, pp. 286–288

of jurisdiction.<sup>6</sup> In this logic, the maypole would metonymically, *pars pro toto*, stand for the whole of vegetation and its death in the water would provide rain for the latter.

The first doubt that comes to mind when we follow this argumentation, however, is why would the randomly chosen king-tree have to be drowned in the process of assuring water for its subjects? If it is their holy representative and anything that happens to it happens to the whole, why would it not suffice to water the still-planted tree without killing it? And, if the tree does have to be uprooted in order to attain its metonymical role, why does then not the whole world of vegetation drown and rot in an apocalyptic flood at the moment that its representative is submerged? We should bear in mind here that *water*, albeit always recognized by archaic communities as vital when applied in manageable doses, also features heavily in mythologies as a limitless, formless and chaotic expanse that can disintegrate the whole world in a cataclysmic flood and return it to its primary state. Taking this into account, it would be equally if not more reasonable to assume that, as the maypole's grave, water plays the latter role, i.e. that of an all-accepting and limitless abyss that annihilates the individual form of anything thrown into it, and *not* that of a carefully applied fertile power.

We could still explain the beneficiary environmental effects of this annihilation in the familiar terms of religious *sacrifice*. Within this logic, nature's offspring becomes clipped in its prime as a gift for the supernatural beings governing the world; man renounces nature's freshest fruit in favour of the gods, so that, in return, they might spare the whole of their anger. Sacrifice is an ascetic practice: man introduces an artificial split between himself and the natural world in which he thrives, by making a biologically senseless gesture (destroying a perfectly useful part of nature) as a bow to a more permanent domain beyond. However, rephrasing the problem in terms of sacrifice merely raises a new question: which "gods" might the young tree be sacrificed to, if the only deity we are explicitly dealing with at this point is the very maypole, i.e. the "vegetation god" or "tree spirit" itself? Within the maypole ritual, there is nothing but the comic, material mock-idol; we are not yet entitled to presume any concept of a purely spiritual domain populated by deities worthy of serious worship. This is a problem field that has been opened up by Frazer, Freud, Girard and many others, and has centred on the strange relation between 1) sacrificing a purely material god, 2) sacrificing a (material) effigy or embodiment of the (spiritual) god to the same god, and 3) sacrificing a material object that has nothing to do with the god to the purely spiritual god. The explanations proposed were many and diverse, but we will outline them in contrast with our own in the continuation of this essay.

Another pertinent question that seems to haunt the maypole ritual is closely connected to the first one: not only why the death of an idol might be thought beneficiary for its delegated domain, but why should the idol as such in the first place be created by an aggressive intervention into that domain? In other words: why is the "god of vegetation" produced by cutting down a tree to begin with? Why, if these rituals are indeed, as common wisdom has it, "celebrations of nature's annual revival", do they entail the killing of a part of nature in whose revival they supposedly rejoice? Frazer sought to address these antinomies by proposing a naturalistic logic behind the rituals: the death of the old is unavoidable for the new to prosper and so the old effigies of the

<sup>6</sup> See the argument on pp. 337–338.

god of nature have to be annually destroyed to transfer their spirit into a new, younger and stronger abode. The maypole ritual however demonstrates with utter clarity that it is not the old but precisely *the young tree* that must die and that even though this death is sometimes used as an agent to fertilize the new crops, the dead corpse of the tree is more frequently banished beyond the confines of its worshippers' community.

It seems as if the mechanism at work within the maypole ritual can be satisfactorily described neither with the naturalistic logic of fertilizing the new with the death of the old nor with the ascetic logic of metaphysical religion where the innocent and young is sacrificed in favour of a bloodthirsty immaterial domain, although it seems to bear links with both at the same time.

The answer I would like to propose in this article is that the particular dialectic of life and death at work in the maypole ritual is thus neither that of natural cycles nor that of a truer life beyond death in metaphysics but that of the most basic, purely material level of *signification*. If the maypole is indeed a "symbol of vegetation" or a "tree spirit", then it seems that *a tree has to die in order to become a "spirit" or a "symbol"*. This is not yet the paradigm of the soul being freed by the death of the body but that of a much more basic and mechanical operation. It appears that when the tree is killed, when it is cut off from its roots in the soil, excised from its natural forest environment and brought onto the empty expanse of the village square, this fulfils all the conditions for it to begin a second life as a "symbol" or a "spirit", not yet really a symbol or spirit of anything but *a symbol as such, a symbol in its basic, as-yet non-referential form*, merely as an uprooted, isolated and free-floating fragment of natural matter.

Following the logic of this thesis then, the maypole as a "tree-spirit" would not really be the spirit of a tree or even of trees in general but *a tree as a spirit*, a tree re-made into a material symbol by being violently excised from nature and then resurrected as an undead corpse in the clean-swept village square. This hypothesis might provide us with a consistent explanation as to why in some parts of Europe, at the time of Frazer's writing, very similar festivities, taking place around the same period of the spring solstice, centered on a figure identified as the precise opposite of a "god of new life" – as "death" or "winter"<sup>7</sup> – a figure most often represented as an old lady or a skeleton, but treated in an almost identical way as the maypole and sometimes even embodied in the same kind of object, i.e. a rootless tree carried around in public processions.<sup>8</sup>

Frazer's claim was that these were two distinct sets of rituals conflated into one: one bent on exorcising evil annually built up within the community via a scapegoat figure, and another focused on celebrating the arrival of the new year.<sup>9</sup> The two aspects, however, seem to appear within a single figure much too often to be separable into clear-cut opponents.

René Girard later offered a famous reading of this dialectic that ascribed the positive aspects of the sacrificial victim to the beneficial effects of its ritual murder on the stability of the executing community. The scapegoat was identical with the positive

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 288–290.

<sup>8</sup> Comp. a Russian ritual where a felled and festooned tree is explicitly named "Morena" (Winter or Death, as Frazer adds in brackets), *ibid*, p. 293.

<sup>9</sup> Frazer, pp. 589–590.

god because its killing “miraculously” restored peace and order;<sup>10</sup> hence the logic of a god who sacrifices himself for the good of the community. However, it seems to us that within the comic rituals, death and sanctity have an even more immediate connection that does not call for a bypass via social or psychological effects, and, more importantly, one that has been established well before the carnival king’s final annihilation. If we follow our thesis on the maypole as a pure, non-referential yet material symbol, we will provisionally dub it a *pre-symbol* for the purposes of this argumentation, it makes perfect sense that it should appear both as a spirit of awakening nature *and* as a symbol of death. If a pre-symbol is nothing but a piece of nature cut from its surroundings and resurrected as a living corpse, then it is always a “symbol of death” and “life as a symbol”. A pre-symbol *is* by definition natural growth, *plus* a contour of the pure negativity of death excising it and suspending it in an undead state. The mock-idol is thus not, as Girard claims, mocked as a prelude to the more direct aggression of its lynch, and venerated in anticipation of the beneficiary effects of its death; rather, the mock-idol is venerated because it is, in a way, already dead but – and this is its funny side – still keeps on existing as the concrete, palpable central idol of the celebrations. The maypole is both holy and funny because it hovers halfway between mere nature and fully constituted spirituality.

Therefore, if the mock idol is always already dead at the time of its ruling then the death that meets the king of carnival at the conclusion of the festivities – the death that drew the attention of Frazer as well as Girard – is already his *second death*. These two distinct deaths – with the comic idol claiming the interlude between them as his period of temporary triumph – can be pinpointed in most rites containing an element of the comic. Let us consider an example. If we carefully observe the operations carried out by the use of water in the spring rituals described by Frazer, we will notice two types of its application, which are in a way similar but also highly distinct. Many types of spring idols end up being buried in a river or even the sea, but many of them are also exposed to more controlled watering, to ritual washing (not the maypole *per se* of course but persons and statues that take its place in analogous rites<sup>11</sup>), to having water poured over them or merely being sprinkled with it. Frazer explains them all via the theory of sympathetic magic<sup>12</sup> – and in the case of the sprinkling this is actually a more convincing argument than if applied to the burial. However, what cannot escape one’s attention here is the obvious link of these gentler watering practices with the other great role of water in modern religion; i.e. complementing its already mentioned part as a chaotic primal state of being, namely that of the blessing by the sprinkling of

<sup>10</sup> Rene Girard: *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979. Most explicitly formulated on pp. 85–86

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Frazer, p. 273 for the bathing of Kostroma in Russia, pp. 303 and 341 for the washing of the effigy of Tammuz in ancient Babylon. pp. 341.2 see also for washing rituals connected to St. John’s Eve in southern Italy.

<sup>12</sup> “For ignorant people suppose that by mimicking the effect which they desire to produce they actually help to produce it; thus by sprinkling water they make rain [...] The throwing of the gardens and the images into the water was a charm to secure a due supply of fertilizing rain. The same, I take it, was the object of throwing effigies of Death and the Carnival in the corresponding ceremonies of modern Europe. Certainly, the custom of drenching with water a leaf-clad person, who undoubtedly personifies vegetation, is still resorted to in Europe with the express purpose of producing rain. [...] The throwing of the Karma tree into the water is to be interpreted as a rain-charm.” (Ibid, p. 338–339)

holy water and of baptism. Water as a primordial abyss and water as a spiritually purifying, baptizing agent are two distinct concepts that however also display a strange link within rites featuring the pre-symbol. Examined in the light of our thesis about the comic idol, it seems that here, water as a mythic element diametrically opposed to differentiation, is actually used, in limited quantities, as the purely negative means of differentiation before finally becoming an agent of complete annihilation of the differentiated entity. At the beginning of the ritual, water plays the role of washing off all traces of nature from the piece of matter that is to become a comic idol, it plays the role of pure negativity, separating the bit of nature from the natural world and baptizing it as a cultural object. At the end of the ritual, on the other hand, still acting as pure negativity, it “finishes the job” and destroys the idol altogether, engulfing it in its undifferentiated totality. Water as an agent of negativity, as “pure difference”, is at once what transforms natural matter into an object, that which excises it from its immersion in a relative organic whole and isolates it – which ultimately makes it “holy”, consecrates it, baptizes it – and what finally destroys it without a trace.

In some comic rituals, the idol at the end of the carnival is not drowned but burned,<sup>13</sup> and this gesture also has its gentler analogue in a “baptism by fire”, where a piece of natural matter is transformed into a sacred object by temporarily exposing it to flames: this is the logic behind the “Yule log”, a block of wood consecrated into a powerful charm by being scorched in the fire,<sup>14</sup> as well as behind ritual leaps over the bonfire in certain folk customs. One might of course argue that it is not the piece of matter *per se* that is considered holy in these rites but the medium – the “sacred fire”, the “holy water” – and that contact with this medium transfers the sanctity onto the object. However, this too could well be rephrased using our logic: water and fire are here not really holy in their positive substance but precisely as agents of pure negativity; what is holy here is the nothingness, the gap, and whatever shines, excised and isolated on the background of this gap, can serve to embody the flipside of this purely negative holiness as a concrete partial object.

In concession with our argumentation this far, our thesis is thus that carnival, ritual mockery and *any* true comical constellation for that matter, is a cosmic worldview organized around a central, presiding comical object, whose defining characteristics are that it is, on the one hand, perfectly material and perfectly contingent in the choice of its material, but, on the other hand, also “unnatural”, uprooted from the firm ground, free-floating and stubbornly insistent in its undead status, perhaps even indestructible, for although it seems to be annihilated at the closure of the festivities it inevitably makes a comeback in a year’s time, sometimes residing in a utopian “other land” during its absence.<sup>15</sup> While a traditional logic would lead us to state that it is the immaterial, absent form of the idol that accounts for its permanence and that the tem-

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. p. 287, where drowning and burning are directly posited as interchangeable in one example, as well as p. 285 for an example of a typical combination of burning and throwing into the water at the burial of Carnival.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 738. See also the Slovene-Croatian tradition of the “badnjak”.

<sup>15</sup> This, at least, is true of Carnival and St. George in Slovenian folklore: as attested by comparative mythologist and ethnologist professor Zmago Šmitek both figures are said to be “on a journey” when their festival is not taking place (see for instance Zmago Šmitek: *Kristalna gora – mitološko izročilo Slovencev*, Ljubljana: Forma 7, 1998, p. 110 for the case of Carnival), and a similar claim could be made for other rulers of temporary, festival-based utopia, such as the golden age rulers Chronos and Saturnus

porary presence is merely a profane incarnation of this undying spiritual principle, we would like to suggest the inverted relation as primary: the idol is primarily present, material (the touch of absence implicit already in his “living death”) and his final departure only opens up the spiritual domain for the first time: the spiritual domain is that of the comic object as absent.

Let us now examine the relation between god and the sacrificial victim schematically within pre-existing theories in light of this hypothesis. As historically the first in line Frazer claimed that the victim was initially identified with a god, but that its death enabled the enduring spiritual aspect of this god to be transferred to a fresh material vessel. In Frazer, thus, the victim and god are identical, but the spiritual aspect of god is still thought of as primary and essentially separate from its embodiment. Freud’s theory is more dialectical: death is not seen as an unfortunate contingency of the spirit’s representative to be repaired with his periodic replacement, but as the very origin of spirituality. The domain of the spiritual with the killing of the *Urvater*, a pre-human clan’s alpha-male and the figure of God is traced back to this dead father. His original murder, claims Freud, opens up first the domain of unnaturally orgiastic enjoyment, enabled by the sudden release from his constraints and then, as the moral hangover takes over, the domain of self-imposed asceticism ruled over by the dead father: this original scene is then mirrored in the form of the festivities, i.e. the phase of carnivalesque abandon followed by a return to the asceticism of the human quotidian. Any further separation of God and the victim is but a masking of this primary identity: even ritual sacrifice to a transcendent God merely relieves humanity of the burden of guilt for the *Urvater*’s murder by making the murder a request of this very same Father transposed into a super-sensual domain.

Girard subscribes to the same hypothesis about a god being created with the death of the victim, but adds his own twist, where the victim is not the king but an innocent outsider and his killing does not open the carnivalesque, orgiastic phase of the festivities but serves as its culmination and closure.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, in Girard, the orgiastic phase (conceived as the re-enactment of the “sacrificial crisis”) is not a time of freedom from the Father’s rule but a time when the viral element of violence reigns supreme and circulates the community, embodied in the “carnival king”, whose killing ends the chaos and reinstates a stable community.

Our theory a critique of both attitudes formed at their intersection. Girard is right in criticizing Freud for not seeing that carnival is not simply freedom but an obsession, a time ruled over by *something* killed at the *end* of it; but Freud would also be right in criticizing Girard for not seeing that we can only be so obsessed by an element that already contains an element of death. Hence, the virus of violence that circulates the community has to be first created by a violent incision into nature that gives birth to the holy comic object, but this comic object has to be killed a second time at the end of the ritual to create a properly transcendent God presiding over an ascetic society. The separation of the victim and the god that follows is at once misleading and inevitable: the spiritual and serious god *has* to be separated from his material base

---

who were said to preside over the Greek Chronia and Roman Saturnalia respectively and were said to be spending the rest of the year ruling over a permanent ideal state on an exotic island.

<sup>16</sup> See Girard p. 214 for his critique of Freud’s misrecognition of the victim and his misplacement of the time of its death, “at the end – not the beginning – of the sacrificial crisis.” (Ibid)

in the comic pre-symbol in order to function as the base of a stable society but this separation also necessarily denies the truth of the actual identity of the comic and the sacred embodied in the two-sided pre-symbol forming a barrier and link between the material and the spiritual domains. And this hidden truth of the stable symbolic is what periodically breaks through in all comical rituals.

## 2. Frazer and the phallus

This brings us to the question of a reason. With Frazer, the carnival king is worshipped because he embodies the principle of nature on which primitive man depends for his survival; with Freud, on the contrary, the cultural importance of the dead alpha-male lies in the implied divorce from natural law; with Girard, at last, the lynched outsider is revered because he has restored peace in the proto-community – what explanation do we offer for man’s fascination with a concrete nomadic object that is at the same time a king and an outcast of a given field? The first explanation that comes to mind is that what man worshiped here was an image of himself as situated in the physical world. Conceptual descriptions of man’s particularity in relation to the rest of creation have always oscillated between that of a king and ruler and, on the opposite, that of an outsider, a being with no fixed place in the natural order that can adapt to almost any environment because he is perfect for none. We might thus argue that the violent excision of the young tree from its natural environment and its re-erection in the blank space of the village square actually *re-enacts the impossible, mythical point of man’s exclusion from nature and his establishment as a singular exception*. Following up on this premise, when man jocularly worships the maypole he, therefore, does not worship nature and its miraculous regeneration, but bows to his own specifically human, comic status of a homeless and vagrant, undead and unnatural fragment. When the festivities end and man’s arboreal double is expelled beyond the confines of the community’s local world, however, its role becomes the precise opposite. Sent off into an “Other world”, the carnival king becomes the ruler of a fictive domain that man, in contrast to the one he resides in, may truly call home. What started as an external formulation of man’s homeless and senseless status in the world, becomes, when its material symbol is destroyed, the domain of man’s sense and true home. After the destruction of the pre-symbol, man only appears homeless, senseless and groundless in this world because his true sense, home and ground reside in another.

However, there is something we must add to this image for it to attain its full complexity. If our thesis seems to campaign for the maypole simply as man’s double, which turns into God when it is projected beyond the pale, we should note that there is something too opaque and non-reflective about the comic idol in relation to its worshippers to allow for this reduction. In other words, an air of “mystery” already surrounds the maypole even before its expulsion into invisibility, although it is a mystery very distinct from the concept of God’s ultimate ineffability within a metaphysical framework. The most consistent solution offering itself to us is the one that had been stuck to discussions about the maypole all along – that of casting the maypole as a “phallic symbol”. The maypole is not simply man’s symbol for himself but for his phallus, or, better put, the maypole is the phallus as such as far as the phallus is *per se* a symbolic function that, despite endowing man with his specific nature of a being of

symbols, is nevertheless distinct and separated from him. The phallus, our maypole, marks precisely the point where man is not identical with his own self and, simultaneously, the point that makes up his very essence and is, in a way, a miniature copy of the human whole.

What is opaque and non-reflective about the maypole in relation to man is precisely their analogy: the fact that the phallus is to man what man is to the world in which he resides. St. Augustine claimed, in his work *On Marriage and Concupiscence* that man's punishment for rebelling against God's will was to provide him with an organ on his own body that copied his independence by rebelling against man's will – thus effectively stopping man from enacting his free will fully and becoming God. The only difference between man and God *post* the original sin then, according to St. Augustine, is that man is torn apart, fissured by lust and thus not fully identical with himself, a bit of his body always slipping away from the control of his conscious mind. In other words, the only difference between God and man is the latter's phallus and this, incidentally, is also the only difference between man and the maypole: man and his phallus. Thus, we come to the seemingly contradictory formula that phallus does equal man, only minus the phallus.

In line with the comic spirit of these rites, then, we propose the thesis that man's original, comic-sacred god is precisely his own phallus, blessed with a specifically idiotic ineffability, and that this phallus needs to be annihilated in order for God to be established as his persistent absence.<sup>17</sup> Man's affliction is more complex than merely being excluded from the natural world – if he were to be completely excluded from it, he would effectively already be God in the metaphysical sense – no, on top from being an outcast of nature, something is excluded from his own inner world as well, something that is essential precisely to his specification as excluded from nature. We should be careful not to read this thesis in the classic sense, as man being strung out between the heavens and earth, with the divine pulling him upwards and his phallic lust tying him down: the phallus is *not* a piece of nature that has been left behind at man's excision from the natural whole – the lust of the phallus itself is “unnatural” and plays a crucial part precisely in extracting man *from* the instinctive confines of nature. So what the comic rites really bow to, is precisely this double-senselessness of man – not only unlike any other natural animal but also unlike himself, unlike his own essence as human, as well – and, simultaneously, these rites also salute the impossible, miraculous figure of the phallus, excluded from the world without having anything excluded from itself.

When he cuts down the young tree and makes it into a maypole, man enacts the impossible moment at which he was already excluded from nature but when he was not yet torn apart by sexuality. This is why the objects used in these customs have a pronounced sense of youth and innocence: a young not an old tree, and in certain versions of the rites, where the place of the tree is taken by a human being, a young girl.<sup>18</sup> A young girl can stand for the phallus precisely because she is perceived as not having

<sup>17</sup> A thesis that has, of course, been elaborated by numerous structuralist accounts of the “transcendental phallus”. The Slovenian Lacanian philosopher Alenka Zupančič put it to use in an analysis of comedy in her 2008 book *The Odd One In* and it is in part to her discussion of this entity that we owe our argumentation here.

<sup>18</sup> Comp. the Kostrobunko ritual quoted by Frazer, pp. 292–293.

it. On the mythic level, where the maypole is often identified with a fictitious entity of a male god, the latter is a gentle, youthful and almost hermaphroditic figure – as is the case with the myths of Attis and Adonis put forward by Frazer. The story of Attis, whose cult also involved a cut-down tree said to represent the deity,<sup>19</sup> actually ends with Attis ending his life by castrating himself – following which he is said to have been idolized in the form of a Pine-Tree.<sup>20</sup>

While mentioning Attis and Adonis, who both feature in their respective myths as lovers of powerful goddesses, it is worth making an aside note on the role of women within the framework we have described here. We cannot overemphasize the fact that the very literally *phallocentric* structure of these rituals in no way implies the dominance of men. On the contrary, in many cases, the procession of the phallic idol is either reserved exclusively for women or features them as its bearers, as if the phallus' independency of man's will made it just as much – or even more – a women's issue. The role of Attis and Adonis, likewise, seems to be less that of independent men and more of a type of boy-toys at full disposal to their influential mistresses. It is telling that in a scene painted on an Etruscan mirror mentioned by Frazer, where Aphrodite and Persephone fight over the possession of baby Adonis, the latter is never pictured as a person but merely as a wooden chest supposedly containing him, a passive and impersonal object of dispute between the two female deities.<sup>21</sup> The rage felt by manly Ares at his mistress' addiction to this walking dildo is indicative of the negative side of the ambivalent male attitude towards the purely phallic element as impersonal.

It is also not without importance that these mature goddesses with teen lovers – from Aphrodite through Astarte to Mylitta – have often been associated with the ancient world's cults of holy prostitution and although the latter can well function as a breeding ground for highly chauvinist practices of female submission into available sexual objects for the male priests, this is in no way the only route of its interpretation. Holy prostitution could also be, in line with our interpretation of comic phallic cults, conceptually associated with the relation of woman to the phallus as a perfectly impersonal object of enjoyment, universal and unrelated to any particular male. It is highly telling that Frazer's examples of sacred harlotry are usually associated either with the service to a powerful female deity, able to treat men as mere objects,<sup>22</sup> or with a reptilian, snake god<sup>23</sup> – classically read as an emancipated phallus – to whom the priestesses have sworn their fidelity. It is possible to see the link of St. Augustine alternative between celibacy, a recanting of lust in favour of a fidelity to God, and, if one cannot endure it, the marital institution where lust is preserved in a monogamous and

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 346.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Frazer, p. 305.

<sup>22</sup> "In Cyprus it appears that before marriage (*a claim disputed by Schelling as part of a formidable argument in his Philosophy of Mythology claiming that the custom was reserved for married women*, note by I.L.) all women were formerly obliged by custom to prostitute themselves to strangers at the sanctuary of the goddess, whether she went by the name of Aphrodite, Astarte, or what not. Similar customs prevailed in many parts of Western Asia. Whatever its motive, this practice was clearly regarded not as an orgy of lust, but as a solemn religious duty performed in the service of that Great Mother Goddess of Western Asia whose name varied, while her type remained constant, from place to place" (Frazer, p. 312).

<sup>23</sup> See Frazer, pp. 323–324 for West African brides of a python or snake god. The two forms sometimes coincide, as witnessed by a carving preserved in the Astarte/Venus temple in the Middle-Eastern ruins of ancient Palmyra, where the goddess is featured holding a large snake slouched around her neck.

controlled environment, and the pagan alternative between holy prostitution, where the phallic element reigns in its utter detachment from anything particular or personal (and is thus “sacred”), and marriage, where the phallic is fixed, personalized and relatively profanized in the individual member of the woman’s steady partner. Augustine warns of the diabolical dangers of an unchecked phallic element by prescribing either its domestication in marriage or a fidelity to its transcendental mode, while the above-described religious practices consider precisely this “diabolical” status holy – but ultimately, the crucial difference is that holy prostitutes recant marriage because of their fidelity to the phallus as impersonal and universal while Roman Catholic nuns do the same because they are bound to the phallus post its transcendence, post the ending of carnival.

The phallus is the comic king of carnival and carnival is a time when phallus as a pre-symbol temporarily reigns supreme – neither still a natural organ of reproduction nor a transcendent God, but a material non-referential symbol, a floating, mobile piece of matter that does not yet signify anything – or rather, *that signifies nothing*, that is a mark of Nothing as the comic universe’s holey holy. Frazer quotes an ancient Persian custom called “The Ride of the Beardless one” that makes this link between the phallus and the comic idol even more visible. Here, “a beardless and, if possible, one-eyed buffoon was set naked on an ass, a horse, or a mule, and conducted in a sort of mock triumph through the streets of the city.”<sup>24</sup> “The Beardless one” is a bona fide phallic element as, completely naked, clean-shaven, and one-eyed, he circulates around the village suspended above the ground on horseback. This circulation of the mad ruler through the arteries of the community, threatening to wreck havoc, is a highly common feature of the mock-idol and its associated festivities. Most commonly, both in Frazer and Girard,<sup>25</sup> this was seen as a method of assuring that the scapegoat accumulates all of the community’s sins and negative energy before he is lynched at the carnival’s closure. However, from the point of view of our theory it seems that this circulation through the whole of community is simply what the pre-symbol as a floating, unfixed signifier does by definition and as this excluded and obscene base of human culture, hidden from view in everyday circumstances, is set loose to navigate the public space, it enables unabridged enjoyment and chaos. Negativity is deposited onto it in some cases simply because, as an amoral and impersonal material ground of culture, it can take it all on, just like it can take on the hyperbolic quantities of goods within other rituals – still seen in “trick or treat” Halloween customs in the west, but also true of Frazer’s bare-beard for instance who, in his circulation, gathers not negative energy but a share of wealth from the local merchants.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. The Feathered Snake

A similar claim may be made about the monster or dragon so often featured in creation myths throughout the world. This beast is most often interpreted as a kind of undifferentiated primal state of the world that is to be killed by the culture hero so that an ordered world, fit for humans to live in, might be built from its dismembered

<sup>24</sup> Frazer, p. 662.

<sup>25</sup> Comp. Girard, p. 287.

<sup>26</sup> Frazer, p. 662.

carcass. However, since the monster so often surfaces in the form of a giant snake or at least a dragon with a serpentine head, one might wonder whether the beast might not be better interpreted precisely as the element of an emancipated and ravaging phallus, nowhere near the concept of “undifferentiated nature” but, rather, a floating and mad organ without a fixed place, cut off from its anchor in the natural world by a pure, empty difference. In ancient Babylon, this monster took the name of Tiamat, brought down by Marduk, and the temporary period of Tiamat’s reign was celebrated as a carnivalesque phase of a broader cosmogonic festival called Akitu<sup>27</sup> – but carnival in general could be interpreted in terms of a period of the world being comically misruled by a ravaging, monstrous phallic element. Following Eliade’s examples, it seems ancient mythologies most often concluded the creation myth not by a completely destructive triumph over the giant snake, but by the use of its dead body as building material or its head as a founding stone for the world to be created by the culture hero.<sup>28</sup> Considering the wide-spread practice of ancient festivals to periodically revisit the time of the snake’s reign, the hero’s triumph was apparently never permanent since the snake would annually come alive again to the great enjoyment of the community in need of a rest from the hero’s ordered world. I really cannot see why this chain of motifs would not be interpreted, rather than as an annual return of excluded “natural instincts” into culture or as a submergence into undifferentiated chaos, firstly, as a re-enactment of the primary reign of the rampaging phallus, the comic idol, spreading unhindered unnatural enjoyment with its circulation through the community; secondly, at the point of the culture hero’s slaying of the beast and basing the new order on its severed head, as a fixating concealment of the madly gliding element at a steady spot and, henceforth, the founding of culture on the phallus as fixed, hidden and transcendental; and finally, of the annual re-emergence of the dragon as a reduction of the steady cultural order to its true base in the “wild signifier” of the material phallus, the entity that we have here called “the pre-symbol”.

The stability of culture is at once based on this element and constantly threatened by it – culture hinges on it *as* excluded; that is, the pre-symbolic element has to be banished so it may serve, hidden, as a basis for a steady culture, something it can only do *in absentia*, as a transcendent symbol. When it breaks back to the surface in carnival and comedy in general it has the effect of a comically realized utopia – that which has hitherto been projected “beyond” is suddenly here, but in an all too concrete and risible form. However, what also occurs with the beginning of carnival is that things, which have been up to now thought of as “vulgar”, natural or merely material, suddenly become unhinged from their fixed places, hover around freely and generally seem to possess supernatural qualities. The closure of carnival thus has a twofold task – firstly, it has to remove the pre-symbol from the field of vision so it may

<sup>27</sup> “The first act of the ceremony represents the domination of Tiamat and thus marks a regression into the mythical period before the Creation; all forms are supposed to be confounded in the marine abyss of the beginning, the *apsu*. Enthronement of a ‘carnival’ king, ‘humiliation’ of the real sovereign, overturning of the entire social order (according to Berossus, the slaves become the masters, and so on) – every feature suggests universal confusion, the abolition of order and hierarchy, ‘orgy’, chaos.” Mircea Eliade: *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 57

<sup>28</sup> Comp. Eliade, p. 55 (for Marduk creating the world from torn fragments of the snake’s body) or p. 19 (where he comments on an Indian ritual of securing the head of the underground snake supporting the world before laying the first stone of a new building).

reclaim transcendental status, but secondly, the material aspect of the dragon, which had gotten loose from its anchorage in the earthly soil, also needs to be re-grounded to matter's proper place.

This is why the burial of the dragon's head underground is different in several ways from the burials by fire and by water met by other comic rulers discussed at the beginning of our essay. For one thing, our formula of "twice applied negativity" does not fit here, and for obvious reasons: the first dose of fire and water, at the beginning of the rite, in our primary examples, was aimed precisely at washing off all traces of the emerging idol's *connection to the earth* and establishing it as a free-floating entity; using earth to do this would be a contradiction in terms. Secondly, while water and fire dissolved the idol at the end of the festivities, making it one step more sublime than after their first treatment, earth, again, cannot do that: while it does remove the idol from sight, it also makes it *more earthly* than before. The burial of the head thus entails a two-way reading: from the thoroughly comic perspective, the burial actually continues the logic of the pre-symbol's revolution – if the carnival started with an emancipation of matter from itself enabling the free-flotation of its dislodged fragment, the burial carries this even further by actually *replacing* earth as a natural foundation with the unnatural element of the free-floating phallus. Precisely because culture is conceived as founded on this element – and not on natural ground – it can dissolve annually into an enjoyable carnival state. In contrast, the burial also lays the ground for establishing a permanently serious order. Hiding the dragon's head from the world enables the world to be ruled by its absence in the form of a transcendental signifier that also signifies nothing apart from itself but is non-material and highly unfunny, while at the same time its material side, the scandalously embodied free-floating signifier, is re-naturalized, i.e. pushed back into its place in the immobile ground and fixed to a steady signified. In many versions of the myth, the monster is actually chained to an underground rock: the trouble with the dragon is not solely that it is an earthly element but that it has wings, that it will not "stay in its place", will not stay underground but keeps springing up to wreck havoc and enjoyment upon the populace.

#### 4. A New Beginning

We have stated repeatedly as our thesis that the ritual of comic worship *enacts the origins* of serious sanctity, but – even though it is perfectly possible for the two aspects of rituality to have coexisted from the beginning – comic worship can never be posited as actually chronologically *preceding* all forms of metaphysics and ideology. In other words, we are in no way saying that man initially performed the first comic rite and then, at its ending, with the expulsion of the pre-symbol, discovered serious worship for the first time. As we have tried to demonstrate above, the comic ritual itself can be viewed as a re-enactment of the point in the fictive, mythical past when man was excised from nature but was not yet excised from his own essence by the inner dissections of sexuality – a point which is, in itself, an impossibility. It is impossible to conceive of oneself as being "excised from nature" if one is not already estranged in relation to oneself – the very notion of nature as a harmonious whole and of man as its dislodged part already testifies to man's distance from his own self. And this necessary retrospective stance is precisely what makes these rituals *comic*, accom-

panied by laughter: the comic sentiment, if we follow Freud's lead, can only emerge if we return to something *after* its initial loss – while it is still held as one's own, the object can never be recognized as a source of enjoyment – enjoyment, that is, as an affect distinct from simple pleasure. In the case of Freud's theory, laughter indicates a return to the infantile sources of pleasure after they have been made unattainable by censorship<sup>29</sup> – it is precisely this barring that enables the build-up of energy that is then released when the bar is dissolved.<sup>30</sup> Even more to the point, Alenka Zupančič's Lacanian theory of comedy claims that within the comic, castration itself becomes not primarily what separates us from the sources of our enjoyment but what links us to them as well.<sup>31</sup> Without this trench dug out between ourselves and our organs of pleasure, only childish "immediate satisfaction" is possible – the bar of castration alone enables the enjoyment, the *jouissance* in the external object. Carnival, and comedy in general, enables us to mock-attain this impossible point of origin – not merely imagine it, but actually physically enjoy it, that is, neither return to the impossible state of non-reflective exceptionality nor remain excluded from it but to return to it in its sweet loss; to at once enjoy it and be aware of this; to savour the idiotic maypole as our external organ of enjoyment.

This is why I believe the advocates for murder as the origin of culture, Frazer, Freud as well as Girard, are ultimately wrong. It seems there can be no single real event that opens up culture, just like the relative humanity of the higher apes is always at question and just as it is impossible to pinpoint a moment when a child becomes "fully human". It would seem there can only be a period of slowly evolving recognition that we had already been human for a while without having noticed it, and the reaction that accompanies this realization is laughter. Girard's proposal of a proto-community torn apart by uncontrollable violence (and not functional animal aggression) already presupposes a specifically human element that circulates through it – the lynching of the innocent victim that supposedly jump-starts humanity already entails the conception of the victim as its embodiment. The innocent outsider is only selected as a justifiable sacrificial victim because in his relation to the community he embodies precisely the culprit, the secret ruler of the chaos, the virus that is itself transmitted down the chain of violence but is never affected by it, the phallus as the innocent cause of moral

<sup>29</sup> See: Sigmund Freud: *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 145: "The repressive activity of civilization brings it about that primary possibilities of enjoyment, which have now, however, been repudiated by the censorship in us, are lost to us. But to the human psyche all renunciation is exceedingly difficult, and so we find that tendentious jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost." For further elaboration see particularly chapter IV, "The Mechanism of Pleasure and the Psychogenesis of Jokes", pp. 165 and on.

<sup>30</sup> Comp. *ibid.*, p. 200: "In laughter, therefore, on our hypothesis, the conditions are present under which a sum of psychological energy which has hitherto been used of cathexis is allowed free discharge." and 203: "If a quota of cathectic energy capable of discharge is to be liberated in the third person [...], it must be ensured that this third person is really making this cathectic expenditure [...] It cannot be but an advantage if the cathexis which is to be liberated in the third person is intensified beforehand, raised to a greater height."

<sup>31</sup> See Alenka Zupančič: *The Odd One in*, pp. 191–192: "Castration [...] refers to the gap that separates the body, from within, from its enjoyment, and *at the same time*, binds it to it. [...] Castration is not simply an amputation of enjoyment, but precisely its emergence in the form of an appendix, that is, in the form of something that belongs to the subject in an essential yet not immediate way; something that belongs to the subject via a necessary interval."

corruption. The original father of Freud's conception, in contrast, must always first be viewed as ruler that can be missed, as a parasite of the common goods by the brotherhood before he can be considered fair game – he must in other words be transposed from king to intruder. It seems that any lynch of a human victim – be it of an outsider as in Girard's or a chieftain as in Freud's and Frazer's case – is always already a displacement of the feelings felt towards the indestructible pre-symbol, always simultaneously master and outcast of a given symbolic field.

The comic ritual is not simply about degrading and lynching an individual – as it is often interpreted – but primarily about jocularly worshipping the phallus as the object-base of culture and, at the end of the festivities, about suppressing it, i.e. excluding it *into* the groundwork of the community so it can actively take up this role, the role of the absent base of a stable society. The lynch of an individual is simultaneously too external and too personal to faithfully represent the suppression of the phallus: too external because it transposes the affect from man's inner enemy, his phallus, onto another human being, and too personal because the fellow individual is always too much of our mirror image when compared to the mute non-transparency of the impersonal phallus. This is why we insist that the maypole tree is far from a polite, civilized replacement for the original human victim, but rather the very original phallus, representing nothing but itself, while the human victim is its personification, its lynch a mere secondary displacement of the culture-grounding act of phallic suppression. Not even the physical penis is the most perfect embodiment of the phallus, because it is too carnal and individual for its symbolic function: as Freud once stated, even the penis is nothing more than a phallic symbol. The tree or the phallus-as-mask worn by the ancient Greeks is far closer to the literal meaning of the phallus: a singular, universal and unnatural element artificially attached to the organic body – ever halfway between the biological member and the God of metaphysics.

As comic, this liminal entity is always discovered in retrospect, after it has already been suppressed, its ritual celebration may mark the beginning of humanity only as the discovery that the threshold between nature and culture had already been crossed and must now be comically reconstructed. If European comedy really has its ritual origin in phallic processions, as Aristoteles maintained, we might suggest that all subsequent comedy is to be recognized as a kind of prototypical religion rather than its "profanization". Comedy's "nothing is sacred" attitude could be understood not merely as a pejorative dismissal of religion as silly in its claims of a transcendent God, but also as a reduction of this God to what is posed as its origin: a universal, material and silly entity on the background of holy Nothingness, that evokes laughter as a particular form of worship – one that, perhaps, does no less than reconstruct the fundamental religious sentiment towards the sacred as inextricably interwoven with the comic.

**Vedra skrivnost mlaja**  
**Nekaj opazanj o vlogi komičnega v verovanjih in kulturi**

Izar Lunaček

Članek si za izhodišče jemlje evropske obrede povezane s pomladnim posekom mladega drevesa in njegovim čaščenjem kot začasnega malika, pri čemer skuša argumentirati širšo poanto o komičnem objektu kot izvirnem tipu svetinje ter intimni prepletenosti pojmov svetega in smešnega. Karnevalski in novoletni obredi v primitivnih skupnostih po tej tezi natanko določa začasna vladavina komičnega objekta: ta je ob njihovem sklepu ubit ali izgnan iz skupnosti, to pa odpre prostor za vzpostavitev nadčutnega in scela resnega Boga. Razlika med poganskimi in metafizičnimi religijami, še trdi članek, je v tem, da se v poganskih religijah vladavina resnega božanstva v obredih obnove sveta periodično zruši, pri čemer kot njegov skriti temelj ponovno vznikne začasni komični vladar kozmosa. V luči te teze so ponovno preučene teorije Freuda, Frazerja in Girarda o vzpostavitvi kulture in vlogi religije, njena veljavnost pa je preizkušena tudi na več primerih iz različnih kultur široko po svetu.