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Nice Carnival: an anthropology of institutions, tourism, and know-how

Abstract: As a festival recreated in its modern form in 1873, the Nice Carnival has contributed to shaping the image of the city and of the French Riviera. While many carnivals and fairs in southeastern France have gradually lost success by becoming second-rate spring festivities, the carnival has remained a highlight in Nice: it is the event for which the town invests the most. In the city, the carnival takes place for a fortnight during the school holidays, and it has kept its role as a winter celebration. To explain these characteristics the author seeks to demonstrate the importance of the public and tourist policies that shape the way this carnival is put together, both as a festive ritual and a show. This emblematic carnival is promoted as a tradition and is seen as an economic stimulation process which is put forward through a marketing approach based on a context in which European cities are defined around central significant events. Designed as a leisure and family entertainment event, the Nice Carnival is also promoted as an international show, giving the city the image of a global carnival city at the same level as Venice and Rio. In Nice, the carnival is a lively show with paid admission, complete with grandstands and full of characters with caricatured features. Satire and irony are well organized – the floats and figurines in the procession are chosen by the city council after an invitation to tender. Every year, the city also selects a theme for the carnival. This institutionalization can also be witnessed in how the floats and the various parade figurines are built by experts, gathered together in family businesses. As a matter of fact, in Nice, the carnival is a matter of both professions and know-how. This article tends to show an original approach to the carnival compared with what is found in the traditional anthropological literature -in Nice, the carnival is not a transgressive ritual, a moment for excess, symbolizing inversion and disorder, but rather an official, institutional festival organized by the local powers.

Keywords: carnival, ritual, tourism, festival

Introduction

In anthropology, the carnival has been most of the time depicted as a celebration of excessiveness, disorder and social reversal. This would allow a kind of collective release, favoring a social breathing; its essence would be that of excess (Caillois, 1988: 124). This vision of carnival-like celebration endures. Recently, at the MuCEM (Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée) in Marseille the exhibition devoted to carnival and masquerades in Europe and in the Mediterranean area was entitled „The World upside down”.

The aim is not to question in a radical way this traditional analysis of the carnival, which is historically and ethnographically based on facts. However, I would like to offer a new light by analyzing the carnival in Nice. Indeed, in Nice, the carnival is not a celebration challenging powers; on the contrary, it is a festival organized, orchestrated and funded by local authorities...far from „the world upside down”. This show is often considered as an „anti-carnival” through its regulated, consistent, well-ordered aspect even if the organizers claim for the spirit of the carnival, particularly the mockery.

One has to notice that this famous carnival, which became the emblematic fair in Nice, is the result of a historical process and of avatars. In the 19th century, the carnival is de-

scribed as a noisy celebration, bothering for authorities and in which the people let steam off by organizing battles with plaster pellets (called „confettis”) that could be dangerous and in which members of the middle class and winter tourists enjoyed mixing with the riff-raff (Boyer, 2010 : 223).

After the annexation of Nice by France (1860) the carnival began organizing and institutionalizing from 1873 on. It's when the city council resumed control over it and decided to create it again thanks to a Celebration Committee made up by members of the French and European upper class (mostly bankers), of the nobility and of the owners big estates. The committee reinvented this fair, inspired by the Parisian model according to some authors. What is sure is that the 1873 Nice Carnival was born in a context of an emerging economic and tourist plan of the French Riviera: The arrival of the railroad in Nice, the birth of casinos, the development of luxury hotels... From 1873 on, the carnival softened by becoming a show with tourist goals, the climax of the winter tourist season (Boyer, 2010: 224). Its dedication is to attract foreigners and winter tourists to boost the economy and increase the prestige of the town (Ferreira, 2014: 195). Today's carnival is profoundly shaped by these considerations, it's a show set up by tourist and economic factors which inscribes itself in this historical continuity. To underlie this, from 1873, the custom is to number the carnivals from that founding year: In 2014, the 130th Nice Carnival was celebrated¹.

In my development, I'll focus my analysis mainly on some aspects of today's Nice Carnival such as the promotion of the show or its institutional dimension. This renewed approach is based on an ethnographical survey made for a doctorate in anthropology for the 2014 Carnival. I am to deal with the tourist, institutional and political dimension then the entrepreneur side and the Know-how of the Nice Carnival.

First, I will introduce the main lines of the Nice Carnival, written by ritual and show-linked dimensions.

I) The course of the carnival, the ritual and scene dimensions

The Nice Carnival can be defined as a festive event, organized by the City and made up with a diversity of entertainments, mainly processions. This urban procession is called „corso”; there are several „corsi” during the period of the festivities: classical „corsi”, with carts and „big heads²” and flowered „corsi³”. The carnival takes place in winter, in the middle of the month of February until the beginning of the month of March, for a fortnight.

A carnival „corso” has several categories. It consists in a procession with a cart and groups of about ten or twelve „big heads”, which are considered as the most traditional elements. Within the „corso”, street art productions, shows by schools teaching circus arts and music bands (batucada) are added.

In the procession, the carts are the most visible elements. In 2014, eighteen carts participated to the „corso” carnival. A carnival cart embodies a theme, it has a name and generally, a humourous dimension. Carts move thanks to a hydraulic system which aims at making characters look alive. The sizes of the carts are not regular. They are about 10 to 15 meters high. They are controlled by drivers during the procession.

¹ Some historical events prevented the organization of carnivals in the 20th century.

² 2.5 meters-high character, sometimes carried on shoulders, a breach allows to breath and see where to go.

³ I will not deal with flowered „corsi” in my essay.



Picture 1. An example of a gathering of “big heads”, 2014 Nice Carnival

The carnival is organised by the city through the Tourist Office⁴. In Nice, every year, the carnival is embodied by a King with a defined theme. Carnival is thus a King, a male character, but with his wife, the Queen for whom a cart is created yearly, as well as for their son „carnavalon”. They form a triad of characters that can’t be overlooked, in the Nice Carnival language.

The heart of the procession is downtown. The procession only takes place in the town center of Nice. The grandstands are built on the Jean Médecin avenue and mainly on the Massena Square. Known worldwide, window display of the city, this square has been transformed over the last decade.

This presentation underlines the ritual dimensions of the carnival which is submitted to a code and a repetition: each year there are carts in the procession, „big heads”, a theme, a King and a Queen with their son, the burning of a character symbolizing the carnival at the end of the period... There are things that are bound to remain unchangeable in a carnival.

If we can talk about a carnival rite, the Nice Carnival can also be seen as a show. It is a mainly paying event⁵, where standing rooms cost €10 and seats €25, with a booking device run by the Tourist Office. On the Massena Square, grandstands are built and the processions are followed by a host and a DJ. The whole carnival is designed as a show which, for the organizers, has to seduce more and more people every year. The attendance figures are published by the Tourist Office, the director of the latter being satisfied with those figures which are the ones of his administration. According to him, there were 190,000 paying visitors in 2013, with the same number in 2012. In 2014, through the 13 paying events (mainly processions), it was recorded that there were 9,000 people per event with a top 22,000

⁴ According to French law, it is an EPIC (Etablissement public à caractère industriel et commercial)

⁵ A specially equipped space to watch the show for free is set up.



Picture 2. "King of gastronomy", cart in the 2014 Nice Carnival

people⁶. Recently, the Office has developed e-tickets that can be downloaded on the internet, just like concert tickets.

As a carnival-show⁷ mixture, the Nice Carnival is influenced by tourist and economic dynamics from which a series of promotion strategies are set up.

II) The tourist and economic dynamics around the carnival: organizing, promoting and designing strategy for the festival

A carnival organized by the Tourist Office

In many towns from Provence (Arles, Aix-en-Provence for instance), The City councils organize their carnivals via their Culture department, calling for associations or street-art companies. In such a context, City councils view their carnivals as not as important as their cultural life. In Nice, one can see an original feature from an institutional point of view: the Tourist Office is in charge of the festival. This underlies the tourist vision of the event by town councilors, which makes the festival a central element of the tourist policy of

⁶ Pre-balance sheet of the 2014 Carnival, Tourist Office. Direction committee (Tuesday, March 11th 2014)

⁷ There are no negative connotations in this sentence.

the City.

As an organizing structure, the tourist office is lead by a President, namely the mayor of the town. As a matter of fact it obviously depends on the City council. A director is in charge of the organization of the event. The current director was nominated in 2008, at the beginning of the mayor's mandate. His career path is that of a self-made man and is marked with jobs linked with winter sports. He was in charge of Tourist Offices in Ski resorts and specialized in promoting French ski resorts abroad. This has to be underlined since the actual aim of the Tourist Office is to attract an increasing number of foreign tourists coming to attend the carnival.

The Nice Carnival can thus be seen as a tourist policy which is depicted by the people in charge of it as an irreplaceable necessity for the economy of the city.

„We need the carnival in winter time...” or the necessity to organize the carnival in winter

In the past, in Provence and in Nice, carnivals took place in winter and ended at Lent, the festivities ending with the burning of the Caramentran⁸ in the evening of Shrove Tuesday or sometimes in the evening of Ash Wednesday, and the celebration sometimes started again at mid-Lent. In Provence, there was an obvious link between Lent and the carnival period⁹. Some authors mentioned the fight between Carnival and Lent. The time of the carnival, filled with excess, games, and feasts allowed a kind of release before Lent which was synonymous with strictness. Today, the opposition Lent/carnival is obsolete, there is no real „fight” between the carnival and Lent, the 2 events belonging to two independent facts. Transfers to spring happen: carnivals in Aix-en-Provence, Marseilles, Arles take place in spring, generally in mid-April¹⁰. On a larger scale, in some regions, cities even organize their festivals in the summertime: The carnival in La Grande Motte¹¹ was organized at the end of the month of August in 2014. This summertime carnival is thus a summer tourist attraction.

On the other hand, in Nice, the carnival is kept within the winter season: It goes from the end of February to the beginning of March. Even if it is no longer linked to Lent, its taking place in winter is a kind of historical continuity. Even without this connection with Lent, the carnival is systematically organized during the winter school holidays. Doing so is obviously a means to favor family attendance, for children to come with their parents. It can also be noticed that the carnival starts on a Friday, thus allowing the celebration to begin during a weekend. So we are in a period copied exactly on holidays, moment of leisure and entertainment. This winter show also inscribes itself in the agenda of the French Riviera where several Cities organize their festivals during the slack period of tourism. In 2014, the Lemon Festival took place at the same period, from February 15th to March 5th. In February, the Mimosa Festival also took place in Mandelieu, from the 14th to the 23rd of February.

The organization of the carnival during winter is connected with economic needs. „We do need the carnival in winter” the Director of the Tourist Office explained. If the carnival

⁸ A character that stands for the carnival.

⁹ Jean Marc Chouraqui thus entitled his doctorate thesis: „Lent vs Carnival fight in Provence (1650-1830)” defended in 1981. It is certainly an implied reference to Pieter Brueghel ,s painting completed in 1559.

¹⁰ The Aix Carnival has taken place in Spring since the 1980's.

¹¹ In the Languedoc-Roussillon Region.

is organized in winter, it is for both tourist and economic motivations: this celebration helps maintain an activity during the slack period for sea resorts. Winter is logically the season when people go skiing. Organizing the festival for two weeks at this period enables Nice to remain a yearly tourist destination, in a city where tourism has a strong economic impact.

The carnival is a source of revenue, a precious capital. As a consequence, the city of Nice invests a lot in its carnival. According to Mr M., the Director of the Tourist Office, the carnival is the event for which the city invests most, about 7 million Euros.

The economic repercussions, direct or indirect, on restaurants, hotels, housing, transports or shopping are estimated between 30 and 32 million Euros¹². If it's difficult to check those figures precisely, it seems obvious that the carnival produces a stimulating effect at a rather difficult moment for the economy in sea resorts. Hence this sentence by Mr M.: „Organizing a carnival in spring as other cities do isn't an interesting thing for us.”

From tourist logic, the carnival in Nice is promoted by its organizers thanks to event strategies and advertising.

Event strategies and the promotion of the carnival

In a perspective of tourist development, one of the objectives of the Tourist Office is to increase the number of foreign tourists. From that point of view, the organizers of the carnival follow a historical path: Nice has always been a tourist destination and the city's carnival has always been dedicated to international tourism since the end of the 19th century (Ferreira, 2014: 195). The leaders of the Tourist Office wish to increase the number of foreign visitors during the carnival period. These initiatives seem to bear fruit: in the 2014 assessment of the carnival, written by the staff of the tourist office, an increase by 13% in the booking from abroad thanks to e-tickets can be seen, showing the role of the internet in the promotion of the event worldwide. These reservations come from, in descending order, Italy, Great Britain, Germany and Russia. Booking from Asian countries are underlined as steadily increasing.

Eventually, the report shows new origins such as Indonesia, Mongolia, South Africa and Niger¹³. If the Office tries to seduce an increasing number of wealthy foreign visitors, it is mainly because of the spending capacity in the luxury sector, especially four or five star hotels. In that respect, American tourists are particularly targeted¹⁴.

In such a context, event strategies are designed to attract as many tourists as possible during the carnival. That is why sport events are organized, such as the „Nice Carnaval Run”, inspired by the American marathon „Rock'n'roll”, in which participants in fancy dress run, during the first days of the celebration. This race has a festive and funny aspect: it is an invitation to join the carnival.

Beyond the will to attract foreign audiences, the organizers constantly try to create new events around the celebration. Innovation and communication are key principles. For example, in the 2015 edition of the carnival, a gay carnival, „Lou Queernal”, has been added to the official program of the celebrations, supported by associations and backed by the Tourist Office. This innovative way, which triggered a few reactions¹⁵, can be understood as

¹² Figures given by the Tourist Office in the pre-balance sheet of the 2014 Carnival (p.2)

¹³ Pre-balance sheet of the 2014 Carnival (p.2)

¹⁴ According to the director of the Tourist Office.

¹⁵ Criticism from the extreme-right movements from Nice.



Picture 3. The mascot of the 2014 Nice Carnival (reproduced on various supports)

promotion strategy aiming at communicating by displaying the image of a modern, young, open-minded and creative city and carnival.

Apart from the creation of events, there are marketing techniques for the organization of shows. One of them is the mascot of the festival, created by the Tourist Office. It can be seen on the different communication items: on tickets for the „corso“, on adverts, on the internet website but also on all the by-products of the carnival that are sold by the Tourist Office such as mugs, tee shirts, scarves, pens, posters... Therefore the character becomes the logo of a real „Nice Carnival“ brand. This logo is a character representing the face of the King of the Nice Festival, with a crown and the clothes of a buffoon bearing the colors of the city. He wears both the crown of a king and the clothes of a buffoon, which refers to his duplicity and to the carnival reversal: it is an anti-King, a mock King. The mascot adapts itself according to the theme of the carnival, keeping the same face every year. Hero of the carnival, cartoon-like character, it has childlike features standing for tonicity and feast spirit. Creating such a label enables to communicate, to favor a habit and identification effect. The mascot aims at holding children’s attention. This trend shows that organizers target a family audience. The carnival is a show in which children have a huge role to play. This underlines the childish dimension of the event, which can be seen in numerous current carnivals in Provence (Bromberger, 1989: 236). By using this mascot, organizers do not only feel like getting new visitors but also strengthening and fostering traditional customer loyalty (family’s and children’s).

Among the communication tools, there is still the choice to build characters to embody political or art personalities known all around the world in order to get media attention. More than the French president, every year, the carts represent political celebrities such as



Picture 4: „Gargantua’s return”, a cart in the 2014 Nice Carnival

Angela Merkel or Vladimir Putin. Famous people from the world of arts can also be pushed forward: It was the case in 2014 for Gérard Depardieu, the worldwide known actor. The same year, a cart representing the traditional carnival character of Gargantua used the features of the actor who was a spectator in the meantime. The organizers underline the significant number of „tweets” on social networks that were dedicated to the actor and his cart or the press articles about the carts of Angela Merkel in the German press. In order to qualify this media quest, it has to be reminded that humour representation of politicians or personalities belongs to a tradition: it is a classical part of carnival patterns.

Along with tourist considerations, the Nice Carnival is an institutional and city plan.

III) The Nice Carnival: an institutional and city plan

The definition of the carnival: selecting invitations to tender by the Tourist Office

There are several steps in the setting up of the carnival. Once the theme is announced, a first invitation to tender is sent to select the drawings that will be used as models for the building of carts by cart designers. It seems logical to use such a means. Each year, a committee chosen by the city and the Tourist Office is in charge of the selection of carts. This committee is made of elected representatives in charge of tourism, international affairs or district life and of people from the Tourist Office staff...

A selection process takes place several times concerning the content of the parade. Two selections occur: the first one consists in choosing the sketches of future carts then the second one is set up to build up carts whose model has to follow the chosen sketches.

This choice is submitted to criteria. As for sketches, they have to be, on the one hand, linked with the theme and, on the other hand, be amusing enough to fit the carnival tradi-

tion claimed by the Tourist Office. Some of the sketches, too subversive or shocking, are rejected so that the celebration may remain a decent one.

Concerning the choice of cart models, the suggestions of cart designers have to respect the philosophy of the drawings, to be linked with the theme, to be innovative and dynamic (carts moved by hydraulic systems are appreciated), funny, technically feasible and not too dangerous¹⁶.

As for any public market, the carnival is a question of selecting, being qualified and choosing something for precise reasons: we thus see the role of the Tourist Office and that of the elected representatives in charge of tourism. The committee linked to the city council selects what can be displayed or not.

As an object designed by the city, the carnival is connected to a theme every year and is announced by the mayor each year.

The theme of the carnival: a dynamics and a festive communication tool

The Nice carnival is defined by a theme that orientates the content of the procession.

Every year, a new theme is chosen. This is not something new. Themes existed right from the creation of the modern carnival in 1873 (Boyer, 2010: 224). The theme is a key feature of the „carnival-show“ in Nice, it orders the ceremony. It allows a yearly renewal and prevents spectators from being weary. But some themes can be used again, as it was the case for sports in 1997 then again in 2012. In 2014, the chosen theme was gastronomy and in 2015, it was music.

The choice of the theme requires a precise organization and special criteria. The mayor chooses and announces the theme, during a speech in the evening of the closing ceremony; the themes guarantee lasting quality for the carnival: A King who never dies. The theme is of paramount importance since it shapes the aspect of the celebration and it's the only decision for which the mayor personally decides¹⁷. The theme has to allow a display of current developments with a touch of mockery and good-natured humour. More than a way to entertain, the themes are considered as a communication tool by the organizers: they are generally connected with the policy lead by the city and help value the image of the city. For instance, themes like sport or music are implied references to the numerous sport or music events in the city. Eventually, the theme has to be universal and have an international echo; let's not forget that the mayor alludes to the carnival as the pride of the „patriotism from Nice“ and „one of the greatest carnivals in the world, along with Rio's and Venice's¹⁸“ Nice, a great carnival city, should be able to compete with Venice and Rio; through its carnival the city would display its greatness by organizing a foreground international event.

As an institutional celebration, the Nice Carnival is also characterized by business dimensions concerning the construction of carts and „big heads“.

¹⁶ According to an interview with the director of the Tourist Office.

¹⁷ According to the director of the Tourist Office.

¹⁸ Quotation from the closing speech of the 2014 Nice Carnival.

IV) Carnival firms: family and professional dimensions

The building of carts and „big heads“ is made by four family firms from Nice that we are to call A, B, C and D.

Firms A and B belong to the same family, they are run by two brothers. They both belong to a family that has been working on the carnival for four generations. This well-known family on the carnival claims a tradition and know-hows transmitted generation after generation. Unlike their father who used to work as a chimney sweep, the two brothers are the first ones in the descendants to focus their activity only on the building of carts. Their activity on the carnival has become their job. This trend shows a professionalization in cart building; Nice Carnival workers used to organize themselves in associative organizations¹⁹, most of the time family ones. There has been a shift from a mainly associative model to a business dynamic. This is clearly linked to the legal evolution of public markets (the so-called 1993 „Loi Sapin“), which created a stronger control over contracts to get a clearer public accountability. In order to submit carts, one has now to answer invitations to tender from the Tourist Office, write down files indicating the budget, the dimensions, the colors, and the materials chosen. These new measures put an end to former associations and triggered a decrease in the number of people participating to the carnival. In that kind of selection and invitations to tender, companies compete and it has to be noticed that firm A is in a leadership position. It has the largest number of employees and gets the largest number of invitations to tender. For two decades, it has been selected to build the King's and the Queen's carts, the two most emblematic characters of the Nice Carnival. As a matter of fact, firm A hires 12 permanent employees (CDI) during the building period and, according to the orders, the number can reach 25 to 30 employees²⁰, including fixed term contracts.

Each firm sets up its own distinction and development strategy. As the creation of the characters of the carnival lasts about six months, the firms linked to the carnival develop other activities so as to perpetuate their income all year long. For instance, firm A specialized in artistic street shows.

In Nice, being a cart builder is a real job. That is not the case in most other cities where the building of the carts for the carnival is under the control of voluntary people from associations who view their task as a leisure activity. In Nice, leisure is out of the question: the building of carts is claimed as a full time job in a professional frame.

The word „carnavalier“ (The builder of the carts) is not officially accepted but the bosses of the firms and some employees claim it as a professional category and identity. For other employees, that word corresponds to bosses only, bearing a family story over several generations, embodying tradition, securing authority and authenticity (Lenclud, 1987:116- 117).

In the hierarchy within workers on the carnival, the bosses appear to be at the top, the elite; they are the ones who own material and symbolic resources: they run their firms, they have the building materials; moreover their names are well-known as they belong to descendants of carnival participants, heirs and guardians of know-hows. This seniority gives them prestige and legitimacy.

In all cases, the building of carts is defined as a job requiring technical knowledge and know-how. The work has to be done step by step: working on sleek iron, soldering, sculpting and gluing the polystyrene, painting. The craftsmen of the carnival are thus iron manufacturer, sculptors, painters or even tailors or wardrobe masters. They are all specialized

¹⁹ The cart builders of the carnival could get prizes with important amounts of money.

²⁰ In that respect, there is also the boss of the firm. Those figures come from the various interviews I had with the leaders of these firms.

but can achieve different tasks, their job being defined by adaptability. Apprenticeship is described as an on-the-job impregnation: „there are no carnival schools” is what people often told me. Apprenticeship is initially accomplished according to a „know-how to see” (Cornu, 1991). However, most craftsmen of the carnival have initial skills (painting, sculpture) acquired through professional formations concluded by qualifications. As for bosses, they spent their lives within the carnival system and started participating to the building of carts from an early age. In that family context, the passing on of the work is conveyed from father to son, which defines those know-hows as formal ones: i.e. conveyed by an institution, as it happens the family (Chevalier, Chiva 1996:3). On the other hand, the bosses are nearly all graduated (architecture or electro technics for example²¹). In addition to that, there are self-made men who have attended every show from their youth and who gradually learned all the techniques. One can thus talk about „feeding²²” in the acquisition of know-hows (Salmona, 1994).

The building of carts is often defined as a childhood passion, perpetuated in teenage with the first steps to the setting up of carts for the local carnival. This passion for the carnival, commonly named the „carnavelina” (the virus of the carnival) by cart builders, appears to be all consuming and life-shaping: „Here, we eat, sleep, live while thinking about the carnival!” one of the bosses explains.

Conclusion

So a strong professional and institutional dimension marks the Nice Carnival. The carts are made by family businesses run by bosses owning a symbolic and material capital. These firms answer invitations to tender from an other institution, the city council that, via the Tourist Office, puts up the finance and determines the shape of this celebration. If the carnival is so well financed and promoted, it is because of its being a strategic resource: Tourist and economic logics have a leading role on the period, length and content of the „carnival-show” which inscribes itself in an historical path.

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²¹ It has to be remembered that the carts are moved thanks to a mechanical, often hydraulic system.

²² The word is used by Michèle Salmona concerning apprenticeship in the agricultural world.

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