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Everything you always wanted to know about Bakhtin (but were afraid to ask Groys): Pop culture and the persistence of hieratic senses

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of Boris Groys' and Mikhail Bakhtin's cultural theories, with the aim of elucidating how the concept of carnivalization informs Groys' thought. It argues that engaging in a dialog between these two thinkers provides a framework for understanding pop culture as a significant place where market forces, consumer society, and mass media interact in complex ways, challenging traditional theoretical perspectives. The article reaches such an interpretation, suggesting that Bakhtin proposes a secularized view of popular culture, where meaning-making retains traces of religious significance. This hieratic dimension, marked by the persistence of fetishistic and cult practices, is also observed by Groys in his analysis of contemporary media culture, which is imbued with ritualistic and cultic imagery. Through documentary analysis and critical interpretation, the article contends that the ecstatic dissolution of individuality and the enduring sacredness of icons are key features of current pop culture, where a strong semiotic dynamic drives the continual mutation and transformation of signs. The conclusions highlight the importance of Bakhtin's influence on Groys' thought and his concept of carnivalization, proposing further research into its implications for the study of pop culture.

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1. Introduction

This article seeks to examine the intersection between Boris Groys' ideas and the cultural theory originally developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher renowned for his anthropological philosophy and pioneering research on carnival and popular culture during the historical transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.¹ It is undeniable that many of Bakhtin's concepts remain foundational to cultural studies,² particularly the theories that emphasize the importance of analyzing popular forms. Such an assertion is substantiated by the numerous scholars who have creatively reinterpreted Bakhtin's premises on carnival and artistic forms, such as the genre of the novel.³ Nevertheless, for many scholars, Bakhtin's theory provides a fertile framework for describing periods of historical transition through culture and its struggles over meaning. This is evident in the works of notable cultural theorists such as Juri Lotman's concept of "explosion,"⁴ Fredric Jameson's theorization of the modern novel,⁵ and Stuart Hall's interpretation of decolonial transgressions.⁶

Boris Groys, too, is subject to this enduring Bakhtinian influence. As a thinker who is difficult to categorize and an art critic shaped by the intellectual tradition of Peter Sloterdijk, Groys has devoted his scholarly life to the study of the avant-garde, media, and public intimacy – a network of phenomena in which the relevance of Mikhail Bakhtin inevitably emerges. This article aims to elucidate how Bakhtinian hypotheses inform the theory developed by Boris Groys, positing that the dialog between these two thinkers may yield new insights into definitions of popular culture.

One preliminary comment is in order. This writing adopts a conception of popular culture that, unlike traditional conceptions,⁷ does not shy away from the influence of market forces, consumer society, and mass media – a cultural landscape that can be aptly defined as “pop culture.” This concept, which encompasses both musical genres and pop art – the art movement that, at the threshold of postmodernity, creatively combined consumption and transgression⁸ – enables us to describe a semiotic framework in which the massive and the popular mutually define each other, contributing to the production of meaning in global circulation. While not disregarding traditional conceptions of the popular as rooted in national territory and folklore, engaging with this notion of pop culture allows us to move beyond the typical disdain for consumption practices and objects, identifying in them a valuable terrain for foundational inquiries into contemporary societies, as explored in greater detail elsewhere.⁹

Moreover, it has been suggested that grappling with this broad conception of pop culture necessitates complex analytical operations to liberate mass-appeal products from their apparent simplicity. In other words, as Slavoj Žižek argues in his seminal work *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (1992), there is an “interpretive pleasure in ‘estranging’ the most banal content.”^{10 p.2} In this book, the philosopher dedicates extensive narratives to cinema and television, urging us, through critical theory, to defamiliarize what is commonly recognized in mass culture.¹⁰ Similarly, one aim of this article is to extend Žižek’s project by contributing to the definition of certain features of pop culture, recovering suggestive variables that emerge from the dialog between Bakhtin and Groys – two thinkers for whom culture, in both its folkloric and mass manifestations, preserves traces of deep memory.

Although media and mass society were not central concerns for Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory primarily addressed the history of the European novel and the transition to modernity, a different interpretive approach

is required for this analysis. Therefore, this article will further explore the contemporary relevance of Bakhtin and Groys by translating their theories into the current cultural language in phenomenon such as social media, digital communities, and pop culture trends.

One possible resolution to this issue lies in considering how Bakhtin appears to propose a secularized conception of popular culture, wherein meaning-making retains elements of a religious dimension.³ Groys seems to recognize this as well, particularly in his theorization of contemporary media culture, which exhibits ritualistic and cultic imagery. More specifically, Groys identifies in Bakhtin a particular survival of a hieratic dimension that, whether as a fetish or a cult practice, becomes a distinctive feature of pop culture. This critical approach – which also accounts for the migration of Bakhtinian epistemology into contemporary thought – is explored by Groys in a selection of works, which this article will analyze in terms of their most significant contributions.

With this reservation, through a contrapuntal approach to these two thinkers, I suggest that the ecstatic dissolution of individuality and the persistence of sacredness in icons are two tendencies that could characterize the subjectivity celebrated by pop culture, though both respond to a primordial semiotic function within cultural systems. The following sections will develop this hypothesis by examining the role Bakhtin occupies in Groys’ thought and Groys’ appropriation of Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalization: a celebration of Dionysian exaltation expressed both as a total loss of control and as the survival of meaning through repetitive loops. It is essential to remember that carnivalization¹¹ is a concept proposed by Bakhtin to explain the artistic appropriation of that moment of spontaneous celebration and collective humanism that cultures have experienced since time immemorial. However, the following pages aim to demonstrate that, in his book dedicated to Rabelais, Bakhtin offers a more comprehensive theorization of popular culture – one in which dissolution and iconicity appear to accompany the development of cultures, irrespective of the historical period in which they exist.

To substantiate this hypothesis, the research will employ a qualitative methodology, specifically a documentary analysis, through which key texts by these two authors will be examined, connecting them through shared thematic premises. In addressing key points that problematize the relationship between culture and the hieratic senses, Bakhtin’s seminal work *Rabelais and His World* will be critically contrasted with selected documents by Groys, particularly his book *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* and his artistic intervention *Thinking in Loop*. This framework

will be further elucidated with specific examples intended to suggest avenues for future research, thereby establishing this article's exploratory nature and its inquiry into the complexities of pop culture.

2. Boris on Bakhtin: Dionysian exaltation and dissolution of the individual

In several respects, Bakhtin has significantly influenced Boris Groys, a contemporary art critic and media theorist who has even led seminars focused on the work of the Soviet philosopher, his relationship with Russian culture, and his connections to other thinkers such as Derrida – a connection that is far from coincidental, considering Bakhtin's prominent role in the development of postmodern theory.¹² Manuel Fontán del Junco¹³ reminds us that, in his classes, Groys demonstrated that Bakhtin's concepts of carnival and the polyphonic novel are more valuable than other categories when addressing the problem of art in general, and of artistic installations in particular.

Bakhtin is also a subject of philosophical inquiry for Groys,¹⁴ who characterizes the Soviet thinker as an “anti-philosopher.” If philosophy has historically been defined as the pursuit of truth, several modern thinkers, including Bakhtin, operate in a divergent manner, not through critique but through the issuing of directives. What Groys defines as antiphilosophy refers to a distinctive discourse that, rather than explaining the nature of reality, seeks to intervene in it: “The world must first be changed; then it will show its true nature,” as Groys summarizes his approach.¹⁴ In Groys' estimation, Bakhtin belongs to among the esteemed figures such as Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin, and Marshall McLuhan, due to his profound theorizations on carnival and popular celebration.

Building on Groys' reinterpretation, I propose to delineate two principal threads that illuminate certain aspects of popular culture, conceived as a contentious battleground of meanings – a cultural domain where relative hierarchies are displayed, and where bodies converge in ideological confrontations that challenge hegemonies. This interpretation is encapsulated in *Rabelais and His World* (1984),¹ a work to which Groys repeatedly returns, demonstrating that Bakhtin's seminal study functions as a sociosemiotic theoretical framework that addresses cultural phenomena as part of an ongoing production of semiosis – a specific social use of signs that presages semiotic theory.¹⁵

The first thread involves a contentious cultural treatment of individual subjectivity, considering that “Bakhtin's carnival corresponds to Nietzsche's Dionysian mystery, transgressing all that is individual.”^{14, p. 185} To fully grasp this assertion, we must first acknowledge how Boris

Groys recognized the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on post-revolutionary Soviet philosophy, particularly its explorations in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which facilitated the development of a certain revolutionary critique, although not in conventional terms. This is particularly evident in the case of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose cultural theory, according to Groys, is derived from Nietzschean thought. Bakhtin is also emblematic of those anti-philosophers who, on the margins of Stalinism, “strove to continue the tradition of Russian non-Marxist thought and to examine the cultural situation in the Stalinist Soviet Union.”^{14, p. 169}

In this regard, Groys is not mistaken: due to certain academic interpretations, such as those advanced by *Tel Quel* and Cultural Studies (particularly in the traditions of Kristeva¹⁶ and Williams²), literary criticism has found in Bakhtin, a sort of linguistic prophet who revealed the ideological character of the sign as an arena of social struggle. However, in recent years, we have come to understand that many hypotheses attributed to Bakhtin actually belong to Valentin Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929)¹⁷ – a philosophical treatise that generated considerable interest among left-wing intellectuals due to the revolutionary agenda it promised. Amplified through translations into various languages and the terminological fluctuations among theorists from the so-called “Bakhtinian industry,” debates over authorship have led to erratic readings of the Bakhtinian corpus, confining it to language studies and to a Marxist tradition with which Bakhtin never openly aligned himself, as we have previously discussed at length.⁹

In any case, other Soviet intellectuals also found critical perspectives beyond Marxism, for example in Nietzsche's philosophy, which, as Groys elucidates, was combined with Russian ideology and – paradoxically, as it may seem – with the Orthodox religious tradition. Thus, we can speak of a certain “Christian reception” of Nietzsche, but it is worth clarifying that neither the German philologist nor the value system of Stalinist culture would have adhered to this interpretation. It is important to note that in Bakhtin (and in Groys, as will be explained below), some reminiscences of Orthodox Catholicism can actually be detected,¹¹ as Kristeva¹⁸ recognized early, pointing out a certain unconscious impact of Christianity on the humanist language of the carnival theorist.

In a certain sense, one might infer that some Soviet intellectuals confronted the totalitarian regime by advocating the dissolution of the individual subject through intoxication and the superhuman drive that Nietzsche defined as Dionysian. In that historical context, Nietzschean readings contributed a description

of the ecstatic atmosphere, propagating in Russia by Communism¹ and the Revolution through “the single, ambivalent Dionysian impulse – as destructive as it is creative.”¹⁴, p. 180

This provides another perspective on the ephemeral loss of individuality that characterizes both political revolt and collective celebration, even in religions that find a form of realization in collective ecstasy. In this regard, Groys suggests that Bakhtin’s carnival may be influenced by a Nietzschean framework: a profoundly transgressive celebration that functions through role inversion and the subversion of dogmas. This interpretation may constitute a veiled critique by Bakhtin of the hierarchical and monological cultural life of the 1930s, a reading supported by some prominent scholars of his work.¹⁹ In opposition to this official culture, Bakhtin positions that everything, ultimately, belongs to the folk (*narodnost’*),¹² but as a creative disorder of collectivity: each individual may lose their individuality, but every voice is heard in unison, like “a chorus of the laughing people.”¹¹, p. 474

While Groys’ interpretation – and even Bakhtin’s premises – do not provide concrete explanations, both suggest that the contradiction between the individual and the collective reflects a popular culture that tends to dissolve subjectivity in favor of communal excess and abandonment. This can be spontaneous (as seen in phenomena such as herd behavior and certain practices at musical concerts, festivals, or football matches) or driven by market forces or media influence.

Although this dialectic is not directly concerned with our definition of pop culture, certain passages allow us to further characterize it, especially in recent practices. For example, social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and

Facebook create digital communities with concrete and often violent effects on social order. This interpretation aligns with current phenomena such as cancel culture, where celebrities or publicly notable individuals face massive, organized boycotts through social networks. This mass withdrawal of public support reflects a form of radical vigilantism in the virtual realm: a social punishment that, in the discourse of social media, serves as a sanction for ethical, moral, or cultural transgressions that traditional legal systems may not address promptly. It is interesting to examine the relationship between the discourse of “political correctness” and pop culture, particularly considering that many celebrities have experienced rapid declines, underscoring how these public figures exemplify the values of their era.

Or consider, for example, the concept of “armies.” A military term used to describe organized, decentralized, but often large groups of fandoms that also engage in social media and pop culture. This term, popularized by the K-pop band BTS (ARMY, an acronym for “adorable representative MC for Youth”), can also characterize the behavior of devoted fans of musicians such as Taylor Swift (the so-called “Swifties”) or Beyoncé (referred to as the “Beyhive” in homage to “Queen B”). These so-called “armies” exhibit a contemporary form of the semiotic phenomenon described by Lotman,²⁰, p. 75 as herd mentality –social behavior in which “the individual is permitted to enter only the realm of the irrelevant” – because the collective prevails as a homogeneous unit (a concept evident in brotherhoods, sports teams, etc.). It is crucial to note that these pop culture “armies” also demonstrate strong activism (they condemn violence, racial discrimination, right-wing politics, and abuses related to gender differences), reflecting their close correlation with other collective movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. However, their responses can sometimes escalate into high levels of discursive violence and viral attacks. While further evidence is needed, studying these collective phenomena may provide insight into the value systems prevailing in pop culture.

Returning to Groys’ interpretation, the acceptance of the collective variable in Bakhtin’s carnival has led to a recurring interpretation of Bakhtin as a “mouthpiece of the democratic.”¹², p. 3 One must remember that Bakhtin perceives culture as a sphere of competing voices and ideologies, with the novel serving as a stage for their democratic contention. Thus, it is not possible to search for truth in this Soviet philosopher (an “anti-philosopher,” as Groys described him), an excessively idealistic goal for someone who believes that “the struggle of ideologies never ends with the final historical victory or defeat of one

1 It is worth noting that the conception of collective action and revolt is more thoroughly explained through the traditional Marxist concept of class consciousness. Philosophers such as Eduardo Grüner identify class consciousness as a form of subjectivity that is not individual, but collective, and, moreover, active and critical, as it is intended to be functional for the praxis of social and historical transformation. For Gruner, this concept, which pertains to the human collective of the organized proletariat, represents Marx’s departure from the strictly “individualist” perspective that views the subject as a monad. This interpretation is discussed in: Grüner, E. *Lecturas culpables. Marx(ismos) y la praxis del conocimiento*. In: Boron, A.; Amadeo, J.; González, S. *La teoría marxista hoy: problemas y perspectivas*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO; 2006. p. 105-147 [Text in Spanish]. Additionally, a more in-depth explanation of class consciousness can be found in the seminal study by Rogers, A. Class Consciousness. *International Journal of Ethics*. 1917; 27(3); 334-349.

of them.”¹⁴, p. 184 Rather than seeking truth or consensus, Bakhtin emphasizes a struggle for dominance or, at best, a peculiar blend of contradictions that fosters a highly creative process in cultures. As Groys suggests, if Bakhtin’s carnival and pop culture share anything in common, it is their potential to unite opposites and generate an endless array of inconsistencies and bizarre intersections.

It is noteworthy that Groys’ reception¹² casts serious doubt on the traditional depiction of the carnival climate as optimistic and democratic. Instead, he identifies a totalitarian element in carnival, suggesting that it absorbs and destroys everything because no one escapes its celebration. Contrary to the consensus among Bakhtinian scholars, Groys argues that there is no space for genuine democracy within the carnival: “Bakhtin’s carnival is horrible – God forbid being part of it,” he asserts.¹², p. 3 Groys further contends that “an individual does not have any other choice in carnival but to accept his own destruction as a positive thing – as self-rebirth and self-renewal.”¹², p. 4 However, this argument is not entirely convincing. It overlooks the spontaneous character inherent in the original late medieval celebrations, as some scholars have noted.^{21,22} Despite its reductive nature, Groys’ interpretation is relevant as it highlights a certain dark idolatry present in the carnival. In this respect, Groys posits that

... in his book on Rabelais, Bakhtin describes carnival in severe enough colors: the esthetics of carnival generate a constant alternation of “enthronings and dethronings” accompanied by “mirthful” tortures, murders, insults, defamation, pelting with excrement, and so on. At the center of Bakhtin’s carnival stands the cult of “pregnant death,” active during the “mirthful time,” which in death gives birth; it does not allow anything old to be perpetuated but never ceases to give birth to the new and the young.¹⁴ p. 186

Groys is not entirely mistaken: Although the end is accepted as necessary for the conception of new life, a certain dark mysticism seems to persist in carnivalized forms and popular culture more broadly. Indeed, one of the most evocative symbols of this ambivalence is the “pregnant death,” a figure prominent in Latin American traditions, particularly in the rites of San La Muerte (Our Lady of the Holy Death) and in narcocultures. This image, depicting the emergence of new life alongside the end of another, is often represented as a grim reaper with a pregnant belly. However, when he references this traditional figure, another relevant and extensive tradition is explored by Bakhtin who includes the pregnant death among other elements from popular medieval celebrations: a unique reservoir of meanings and symbols from the

ancient Saturnalia and archaic folklore.³ Groys suggests that remnants of this past surface in Dionysian exaltation, which can only be expressed through a complete loss of control, although temporary. While the carnival may reveal “the temporary abolition of individual isolation in favor of collective ecstasy and ‘people’s laughter,’”¹⁴, p. 182 it also introduces ritualistic and cultic imagery, opening an intriguing avenue for other lines of exploration.

3. The sacred, the profane, the loop

The second thread of inquiry pertains to Groys’ interpretation of Bakhtinian theory, which he employs to analyze esthetic objects, particularly within the realm of cinematography.² As an art critic has noted, “Bakhtin takes his examples mainly from literature, but his descriptions of carnivalesque art fit perfectly with the resources with which some of the most famous scenes in the history of cinema have been created.”²³, p. 9: ³ It is, therefore, no coincidence that Groys turns to Bakhtin when developing his own artistic intervention, *Thinking in Loop* – a video essay in which Groys presents several compelling premises regarding the cultural form that appears to define our postmodern era: the video clip.

Although this article does not focus on describing that postmodern cultural genre, a subject extensively discussed by other scholars,^{8,24} it is worth highlighting the specific

- 2 At this juncture, it is important to clarify that this article adopts a semiotic approach, understanding aesthetic objects, media forms, and cultural products in general as models of reality or, in Bakhtinian terms, as refractions of *realia*. From this perspective, culture becomes a battleground where competing interpretations of reality are contested. This view aligns, to some extent, with the ideas of scholars such as Thomas Luckmann and Peter L. Berger, who argue that society is a continuous and ongoing construction, shaped by social agreements that are inherently provisional and dynamic, as well as by certain institutions that legitimize particular understandings of the social order. This theory is discussed in: Berger, L. and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books, 1966. In our historical context, the media might be regarded as the most influential institution today, and this conception of a “constructed reality” can also explain why people distort images of themselves to promote a public image in social networks such as Instagram or TikTok.
- 3 Translation is mine. The institution that organized the Groys exhibition in 2020 subsequently published the written script of its audio-visual exhibition in Spanish and Catalan. The exhibition was curated by Manuel Fontán del Junco (24). More information about the exhibition can be found at: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/lavirreina/es/recursos/boris-groys-pensando-en-bucle/501> [Last accessed: 2024 May 10]

relevance of the video clip to our discussion, particularly in light of Bakhtin's hypothesis:²⁵ certain genres can dominate entire cultural epochs, drawing other forms into their orbit and shaping the creation of meaning. Just as Bakhtin identified "novel-ness" as a symptom of modernity,⁵ the video clip may be seen as a symbol of the postmodernity, we continue to inhabit, a trend evident today in the relentless fragmentation of meaning exemplified by reels and posts on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. In Groys's terms,

There is no doubt about it: today video has replaced text and has become the main vehicle for the transmission of information of all kinds. It is no coincidence that today radical religious movements use video, and not text, to spread their convictions. MTV videos determine the evolution of contemporary pop culture, and, with YouTube, the home video format has imposed itself as the primary medium through which anyone can share their ideas or images with the entire world.^{23, p. 5}

However, *Thinking in Loop* – an essay its author defines as conceptual art – is constructed using microvideos, a seemingly random collage of film fragments, television series, and clips ranging from Madonna's iconic *Like a Prayer* (1989) to movies such as *The Passion of the Christ* (Gibson, 2004). This carefully curated repertoire foreshadows the religious undertones that will permeate Groys's exhibition, which is divided into three parts (*Iconoclastic Delights*, *Religion as Medium*, and *The Immortal Bodies*) and presented as a nomadic installation across various global locations. It is important to note, however, the challenges in fully grasping the premises Groys articulates in these three critical audiovisual exercises, whose cryptic and diverse arguments seem, broadly speaking, to diagnose certain symptoms of the current cultural media landscape.

Despite these challenges, we can attempt to articulate a reading that, through these three video critiques, seeks to underscore their overarching contribution: namely, the assertion of an era "in which the sacred is disseminated in profane space, as well as its democratization and its globalization."^{23, p.15} To elucidate this critical operation, we may recall Pellicer's²⁶ observation of the significance of Lyotard's texts in *Thinking in Loop*, where she identifies Boris Groys's video collages as "three paradigmatic examples of postmodern micronarratives. These micro-narratives revisit the grand meta-narrative of Christianity." The sacred/profane tension thus serves as a central axis in Groys's theory, an idea further substantiated by his theoretical obsessions with the work of Duchamp¹³ – a quintessential example of avant-garde

art that hieratically contests the consecrated status of art itself.

This emphasis on the tension between the sacred and the profane, rather than on the media character of culture, mirrors a key aspect of Bakhtinian thought. Bakhtin similarly identifies this tension as a constitutive dialectic in medieval popular culture, whose worldview, governed by Christianity, proposed a hierarchical structure that subordinated everything to the sacred laws of high and low forms, and their corresponding binaries (earth/heaven, hell/paradise, earthly/ideal, etc.).³ Popular art undermined this sacred/profane dichotomy, becoming its very vehicle, particularly in the novel according to Bakhtin, and in cinema according to Groys. Cinema, a medium destined for mass appeal despite attempts to deify it (such as its canonization as the "seventh art"), exemplifies a paradigmatic operation in a culture that has ostensibly lost its sacralizing power in Groys's interpretation. Yet, it seems that certain hieratic values persist within pop culture, subtly continuing to function in some capacity.

This aspect can be understood by examining how Groys applies the concept of iconoclasm to describe the actions of modern art when it fiercely critiques the status quo of a culture.²⁷ In Groys's view, iconoclasm also characterizes the struggle against prevailing values, a struggle embodied in carnivalesque forms as Bakhtin reveals in his studies. For instance, the destruction of old idols to create new icons is a mechanism of semiotic renewal that frequently recurs across cultures (e.g., the avant-gardes of the 20th century or even recent pop culture with its fashion cycles). According to Groys,

Bakhtin described the carnival as an iconoclastic celebration, but not for being serious, pathetic, or revolutionary, but for its festive climate. The carnival does not hope to substitute the desecrated icons of the old order by the icons of some new order, but instead, it invites us to celebrate the downfall of the status quo. Bakhtin also writes about the general carnivalization that has occurred in the European culture in Modernity, which compensates for the decline of the "real" social practice of carnival until our days.^{23, p.9}

Given this perspective, it appears that, in Groys's understanding, films – a medium that has "earned the right to act as the icon of secular modernity"^{23, p.7} – are emblematic of the struggle that every popular (mass?) product wages against other "sacralized" genres upheld by social elites, such as painting, theater, or sculpture. Moreover, this confrontation persists because, as Groys suggests, it continues a modality of the *vita contemplativa*: these

“elevated” forms of art are presented for contemplation, at the expense of the *vita activa* characteristic of cinema’s narrative nature. In this assertion, a certain hieratic quality is once again articulated:

Every kind of iconophilia is ultimately rooted in a fundamentally contemplative attitude, in a disposition to treat certain objects deemed sacred exclusively as objects of veneration. This contemplation is based on the taboo that protects these objects from being touched, from being penetrated, and, more generally, from the profanity of being integrated into the practices of daily life.^{23, p. 8}

Even so, this contemplative state does not apply to cinema, an artistic form that “moves in time and functions in a way analogous to consciousness, whose flow films are capable of replacing.”^{23, p. 7} For Groys, every film unfolds simultaneously on the screen and in the mind of the spectator, occupying the space of their own consciousness. The celebration of movement and the immobilization of the spectator: “this ambivalence dictates many of cinema’s strategies, including its iconoclastic ones,” Groys asserts.^{23, p. 8} An example of this interpretation is the idolatry cinema exhibits for artifacts that celebrate the speed of modernity (the train, the automobile, the airplane), as well as its destructive nature, vividly demonstrated in slapstick comedies: scenes of destruction that are “veritable orgies of the obliteration of anything that stands upright.”^{23, p. 8}

Another issue Groys addresses in his video essay is the immortality of the body, a subject he approaches through the lens of the Russian avant-garde, specifically the obsession of a group of Soviet intellectuals with the future of the human body – a philosophical program known as “cosmism,” which aligns with certain ideological motives and ideas of Orthodox Christianity.²⁸ It has often been observed²⁶ that religions were, in fact, the first cultural spaces to engage with the problem of immortality (*e.g.*, the finitude of the soul, the resurrection of the flesh, reincarnation in different lives, *etc.*), and there is good reason to believe that this concern is also present in Bakhtin’s philosophy. Indeed, when theorizing carnivalesque death, Bakhtin suggests the existence of a “relative” immortality, akin to a characteristic of the human soul, a notion consistent with his Christian humanism.³

To elaborate, what guarantees our precarious immortality, according to Bakhtin, is the semiotic nature of cultural memory.²⁹ Like a plant that withers and disperses its seeds, meanings persist in culture from generation to generation through the ongoing, unfinished dialog that is history (in Bakhtin’s terminology, “Great Time”),^{25, p. 170} surpassing the biological finitude of both parents and children. One might hypothesize that this idea underpins

the semiotic definition of culture as a society’s non-hereditary memory, a concept championed by Bakhtin’s follower, Lotman.³⁰ This notion finds its most powerful expression in a central Bakhtinian axiom: “Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival.”^{25, p. 170}

In some sense, Groys discerns this relative immortality within media culture, even though, in our time, few genuinely believe in eternity. For example, Groys identifies an immortal aspect in museums and monuments as sites that celebrate cultural memory; in the countless “characters that dominate today’s mass cultural imagination,” such as vampires, zombies, clones, and living machines;^{3, p. 25} and in the narratives that produce meaning through repetition, where “the dream of attaining immortality through repetition is expressed.”^{23, p. 5} As we know, repetition is both the temporality of ritual and a recurring feature of postmodern culture, which often collapses into a perpetual present.⁸ One could assume that Groys is reflecting on the persistence of subjectivity fostered by social media, where our identities endure over time in the form of posts, videos, and digital records of our existence (consider, for instance, Facebook’s recent option to convert a user’s account into a commemorative and semi-interactive profile after death). It is no coincidence that Groys³¹ invokes the figure of Narcissus (the mythological figure immortalized as a flower) to explain certain practices in media society and social networks (*e.g.*, Instagram photos, TikTok reels, and OnlyFans content) that transform public bodies into objects of perpetual design, redesign, and contemplation.

Considering these references, we can better understand Groys’s assertion that religion is the “site of a revelation of the mediality of humanity.”^{23, p. 19} Like Bakhtin, Groys ascribes value to religion, which, in our post-Enlightenment culture, seems to be returning from the margins to occupy positions of significant centrality.¹³ This is evident in his body of work and in the numerous references Groys makes to a religious order, such as his portrayal of the avant-garde artist as a secularized prophet who heralds a time destined to end.²⁷ As Manuel Fontán del Junco¹³ has rightly observed, Groys’s thought develops within the specific frames of reference provided by the Russian-Byzantine tradition – a religion scarcely touched by medieval and Renaissance philosophy, yet one that continues to maintain a particular relationship with icons and representations of divinity, even in our secularized age (a tendency clearly demonstrated by the Orthodox Church).

On this point, one final observation can be made, particularly in light of our postmodern era’s penchant for “the creation of icons of a radical profanity.”^{23, p. 26} Although the term “icon” is now used imprecisely to describe various

scenes and figures, it is important to remember that it was originally a religious concept that later found widespread application in media and consumer society.³² The icon, in its Byzantine Christian origins, represented intermediary figures of God, before whom the believer would pray and honor, but never worship. Pop culture, however, challenges this tradition: the prohibition against idolatry seems to have been forgotten by the great Andy Warhol, who, as a child, was captivated by these images in the churches of Pittsburgh, where his family continued to practice Byzantine Catholicism after emigrating from Slovakia.³³ Inspired by these religious images – their materiality, their use of tempera and wood, embroidery, and mosaic – Warhol developed the pastiche form that would define his work, a synthesis of popular and mass culture (one needs to only recall his “Gold Marilyn Monroe” from 1962).

Since then, pop culture has continually produced icons. Consumer society, with its inclination toward commodity fetishism,³² has even mass-produced idols: emblematic models of masculinity (Elvis Presley, Rock Hudson, Brad Pitt, Henry Cavill, and among others), largely promoted by Hollywood cinema and the fashion industry (with brands such as Calvin Klein, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Versace), stereotypes of femininity primarily fostered by the music industry (Madonna, Britney Spears, Rihanna, and Taylor Swift, to name just a few), and even situations that have become iconic in recent cultural memory, thanks to the very cinematography Groys celebrates (for instance, the shower scene in *Psycho*, the ape wielding a bone as a weapon in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or the flying bike ride in *E.T.*).

A more thorough theorization of the term, which has become embedded in our everyday language, could provide valuable insights into how our “official culture” (now driven by the market, rather than the church or the emerging bourgeoisie as Bakhtin once thought) manipulates signs through what Jean Baudrillard describes as a “semiological reduction.”^{34, p.98} This reduction, which condenses all values into mere sign exchange and usage, is particularly significant in an era where meaning-making appears increasingly confined to an iconic dimension (e.g., avatars).

As Sebeok notes,^{35, p.104} systematic research is necessary to uncover “the suggestive power of iconic signs, and the implications of this puissance for the history of culture,” for iconism underpins every ritual system within cultures, even as its foundational element. It is worth remembering that, since the times of animism and shamanism – long before religion became intertwined with power³⁵ – humans have coexisted with objects to which they attribute agency, often as vessels for spiritual beings. Another

hypothesis can be posited regarding the persistence of a hieratic dimension within our media culture: there exists a primordial relationship between the icon, cult, and fanaticism, a fetishistic order that, according to both Groys and Bakhtin, seems to underpin all cultures. Drawing from these enduring meanings within our secularized societies, pop culture constructs its pantheon of media icons and commercial deities, culminating in what can be described as a “cult of celebrity.”³⁶

4. Conclusion

A non-exhaustive interpretation of Groys and Bakhtin’s contributions allows us to think that the function of hieratic senses is, at least, two-fold: past and present. This premise is corroborated by the ecstatic dissolution of subjectivity and the persistence of idolatry in icons, two tendencies that the Dionysian mystery, Bakhtinian carnival, and media culture seem to equally share. Through the contrapuntal reading of these two authors, the article maintains the interest in highlighting the current permanence of a certain religious and hieratic dimension: an original semiotic function that, in our media and postmodern culture, comes back in the manner of a cultural “return of the repressed,” as Grüner would say.^{37, p.115} Thus, one can suspect that this problem is a tangle that must be unraveled to understand what truly is “the popular” in a culture, a question that Bakhtin¹ seems to suggest when he traced his study of carnival back to Saturnalia and ancient archaic festivals. There are good reasons for thinking that, in these “deeper” frames of meaning-making, Groys rescues from Bakhtinian theory what Cultural Studies seem to have ignored by trying to enclose the Russian philosopher in the collective celebration and the mere democratization of voices. Other fruitful premises nest in his cultural theory because, as Groys advises, in media culture with its tendency toward the spectacular, one may verify how Bakhtin’s conception of carnival truly becomes a paradigm of modernity.¹²

Groys, however, stumbles when he assumes that the carnival is merely a spectacle and a staged event, as those who participated in it experienced a true contradiction of lives, resulting from the collision of two conflicting temporalities (medieval and modern). This is even more pertinent when considering that Bakhtin appears to use the carnival merely as an excuse to explain cultures during periods of historical transition. Although reductionist, Groys’ reading nonetheless complicates the simplistic interpretation of Bakhtinian thought, which is exclusively tied to Marxism,²² thereby overlooking the nuances it suggests, as Bakhtin’s theory “both emphasizes and affirms the cruel and destructive aspect of carnival.”^{23, p.9}

Mikhail Bakhtin and Boris Groys (alongside Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, and Juri Lotman) position themselves as critical cultural theorists who unveil deep memories that return as residual forms. They find in the popular scenes (even in the mass-produced commercials) a political potential that can account for the dynamics experienced by societies during their moments of transformation, as well as in those less evident sacred spaces where meaning changes go unnoticed. After all, as Groys suggests, “sacred places are, by definition, closed, hidden, and dark places, and there are still such places in our globalized world.”^{23, p.19}

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