The Ubiquitous Carnival in Tim Burton’s Movies

Tim Burton’s cinematic work has been described with a wide array of adjectives and proven very resistant to categorizing and pigeonholing. However, there are certain qualities that can be found within most of his works. In fact, Burton’s movies often contain elements that are exuberantly colorful, gay, hallucinogenic, childlike and chaotic. Summarizing these elements best as carnevalesque, they can be found for example in Peewee Herman’s house, Charlie’s chocolate factory or the Penguin’s clownesque entourage. While at first sight these attributes only seem significant because of their stylistic and visual qualities, they carry in fact a much deeper meaning. The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin analyzed in his book *Rabelais and his World* (1965) how the Renaissance’s carnival served as an opportunity for the inversion of the existing power hierarchy. Within the few days of carnival, the people from the lower classes were for once in power because they were able to dress up and to parody the official culture. Thus, carnival is characterized by «an attitude in which the high, the elevated, the official, even the sacred, is degraded and debased, but as a condition of popular
renewal and regeneration». With respect to Burton’s work, the movies’ carnevalesque qualities seem to serve the function of renewal and regeneration as well. Especially — as will be shown henceforth — BATMAN and BATMAN RETURNS contain elements of the carnevalesque that carry the above mentioned political dimension. Thus, analyzing BATMAN and BATMAN RETURNS with Bakhtin’s concept, I will argue that the Joker’s, the Penguin’s, and Catwoman’s carnevalesque demeanor and antics all serve the purpose of inverting the existing power relations.

**Bakhtin’s Theory about the Carnevalesque**

In _Rabelais and his World_, Mikhail Bakhtin analyzes French Renaissance writer François Rabelais’ literary work, especially his novel _Gargantua and Pantagruel_ (1532–1564). More precisely, since Rabelais’ writing relies heavily on the representation of carnival and related festive forms, he attempts «to locate the work of a particular writer in the popular cultural forms that surround him, above all those of carnival»2. Therefore, he analyzes Rabelais’ sources, the nature of the carnival as it is described in _Gargantua and Pantagruel_ and its «relations between this text and the surrounding popular-cultural forms.»3 Drawing from this analysis, Bakhtin makes two basic points. On the one hand, he introduces the concept of carnivalized writing, referring to «writing that has taken the carnival spirit into itself and thus reproduces, with its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inversions, parodies and discrownings»4 of the carnival. On the other hand, while analyzing the carnival as described by Rabelais, Bakhtin also sees an attempt to overturn the power hierarchies at work. Carnival typically took place in the few weeks before Lent, during which time the power hierarchies at work were turned upside down and «the rumbustious popular life of the carnival [stood] against the official but murderous pieties of Church

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1 Dentith 1995, 68.  
2 Ibid., 65.  
3 Ibid., 72.  
4 Ibid., 65.
and State in Renaissance Europe. The «feasting, Feast of fools, game playing and symbolic inversions» thus, in Bakhtin’s interpretation, have a certain liberating energy to them and are able to «invert hierarchies and undermine boundaries». The constant laughter that accompanied carnival turned the otherwise solemn year into both a gay occasion and mocking of the noble élite:

«Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors and tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight.»

The mocking and parodying of the official culture is then what, according to Bakhtin, renders the medieval carnival different from «official feasts of the Middle Ages». Whereas the latter reinforced the order of things and «asserted all that was stable, unchanging [and] perennial», the former «celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order [and] marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions».

Many critics have argued however that carnival has a far less liberating force because rather, it was an upheaval – restricted to a certain amount of time – explicitly allowed by the noble élite. Since carnival was a fixed and accepted part of the social life, it can also be «seen as a safety-valve, which in some overall functional way reinforces the bonds of authority by allowing for their temporary suspensions.» Nevertheless, as Simon Dentith argues, it would go too far to deny carnival any potential for change. Since there exist actual accounts where carnival

5  Dentith 1995, 71.
6  Ibid., 67.
7  Ibid., 74.
8  Bakhtin 1965, 5.
9  Ibid., 9.
10 Ibid., 9.
11 Ibid., 9.
12 Dentith 1995, 73.
was used to navigate power between the popular party and the élite, a carnival was most likely an opportunity to ‘discuss’ power between the two opposite forces.

«Thus, in a typical way, the activities of [the carnival] were organized by different festive societies, whose complex social differentiation and symbolic allegiances were used in different ways. The carnival [...] therefore suggests not that the carnevalesque has one univocal social or political meaning, but that it provides a malleable space, in which activities and symbols can be inflected in different directions. »

Bakhtin seems to be aware of the fact that the carnival could also be interpreted simply as an allowed and tolerated inversion of the power hierarchy. Thus, he attributes to the time of a carnival a utopian quality, meaning that during this time, people could imagine and dream out the change they were hoping for: «[The carnival and similar marketplace festivals] were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance.»

Therefore, in this malleable space, people, who were «usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age», could come into contact on equal terms and enter a second life; a utopian realm in which they were all alike.

However, next to a «sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities», a second factor, namely the so-called grotesque body, contributed to the carnival’s potential for change. Contrary to the classical age, the Renaissance’s carnival was characterized by an emphasis on the materiality of the body. Rabelais’ novel is notoriously explicit about bodily functions and as such «celebrates the body which eats, digests, copulates, and defecates, but who does so in a wild, exaggerated and grotesque way». Termed by Bakhtin as grotesque realism, he claims

13 Dentith 1995, 75.
14 Bakhtin 1965, 9.
15 Ibid., 10.
16 Ibid., 11.
that the Renaissance is – contrary to other epochs – characterized by such a celebration of the body. This celebration in turn comes out the clearest during the carnival. Grotesque realism «is to be understood as the […] expression of a central attitude in popular culture, expressed most evidently in the life of carnival with its feasting»\(^1\). What needs to be stressed about this aesthetic concept is that Bakhtin perceives this materiality to be representative of the popular people. Whereas in the course of the seventeenth century and onward the body became to be understood as something very private, Bakhtin insists that up to the Renaissance the body was the people's body and thus discussed and navigated in the collective. Whereas to the current reader Rabelais' novel might seem repulsive, it is through this very degradation that renewal and regeneration is possible. This bodily degradation (e.g. defecation and digestion) acquires a regenerative force because it is aligned with the lower part of the body, which in turn is connected with the earth. This topographical differentiation – the upper part of the body connects to heaven and the lower to the earth – is thus an important element of grotesque realism:

«To degrade is to bury […] in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. »\(^2\)

Therefore, a substantial part of the potential for change that Bakhtin ascribes to carnival is derived through its emphasis on the materiality of the body. Through this very materiality the body becomes a locus where the social tensions of the Renaissance are both displayed and subverted: «The grotesque body is a site upon which medieval religious and social hierarchies can be symbolically inverted.»\(^3\)

Concluding, Bakhtin perceives the medieval carnival as a time of renewal and inversion because of several practices. Both through empha-

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\(^1\) Dentith 1995, 67.
\(^2\) Bakhtin 1965, 21.
\(^3\) Dentith 1995, 83.
sizing the body’s materiality as well as through parodying and relativizing the official culture the carnival marks an extraordinary time in the calendar. The extent to which the carnival could in fact bring about real change is, as mentioned above, rather disputed. However, Bakhtin states that even the mere possibility to dream and act out this envisioned change turns the carnival into a time of liberation. Therefore, the few days of the medieval carnival enabled the people, who were suppressed by state and church the rest of the time, to envision a different kind of reality before its return to the status quo. For a brief amount of time people met on the market place, celebrated their existence freely and unmonitored, clowns and fools mocked the noble élite and laughter accompanied the gay festivities. Summarizing, “a second world of folk culture is constructed [which] is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a ‘world inside out’.”

The Carnevalesque in Tim Burton’s Batman and Batman Returns

With respect to Tim Burton’s movies, many of the above-mentioned aspects come into effect in one way or another. Be it the materiality of the Penguin’s body, the extreme dressing up of the Joker or the final return to normalcy after the carnival, the carnival is ubiquitous in Batman and Batman Returns. More precisely, in both movies the antagonists – the Joker, the Penguin and Catwoman – try to reach their goals with methods and means that have carnevalesque traits. Several aspects, such as their outfits, aims and methods will be examined via Bakhtin’s theory about the carnevalesque. Furthermore, the analysis will also focus on each film’s respective group that holds the power – the élite so to speak – and how they use festivities in order to maintain their position. Therefore, the following discussion of both Batman and Batman Returns will show how these two movies can be read as a cinematic application of Bakhtin’s concept of the carnevalesque.

21 Bakhtin 1965, 11.
The Joker as The Carnival’s Fool

In *Batman* (1989), the Joker is the most apparent embodiment of the carnevalesque. However, as will be shown henceforth, the Joker presents a different version of Bakhtin’s concept about the carnevalesque. Although he is not only dressed in a carnevalesque fashion, but also uses the carnival as a means to further his interests, the Joker can be said to present a perverted interpretation of the carnevalesque. The topic of carnival as a guiding theme is already established within the very first fifteen minutes of the movie because since it is Gotham City’s 200th anniversary, the government wants to organize a parade in order to celebrate this milestone accordingly. Because faith in Gotham’s leaders has sunk to a new low, they want to restore this lost trust by giving the city’s citizens a celebration. The reason why Gotham has been receiving bad press is because of the high level of crime they have been experiencing and their fruitless efforts in eradicating the all-around corruption. Jack Napier, a former member of Gotham’s crime boss Carl Grissom’s entourage, was once part of this corrupted system and bribed his way through Gotham’s establishment in order to pave the way for his boss. However, things change drastically when Napier falls into a bowl of chemicals during a fight with the police. Napier survives the accident, but remains completely disfigured. This accident is at the same time the important transformation of Napier into the Joker, who, after he undergoes plastic surgery, is stuck with a horrific smile. His crazy nature subsequently comes to light when he sees his deformed face for the first time in a mirror and breaks out into an evil laugh.

According to Bakhtin, laughter and humor were integral parts of the medieval carnival and provided the festivities with its comicality: «Clowns and fools, which often figure in Rabelais’ novel, are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor […] Thus carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter»\(^{22}\). Laughter is very much a characteristic of the Joker, albeit a very perverted version of Bakhtin’s description. Whereas the latter sees the carnival’s laughter as a healing

\(^{22}\) Bakhtin 1965, 8. Emphasis mine.
and regenerative force, the Joker’s laugh is the opposite of that. Full of destructive energy, his crazy laugh will accompany his further actions and mischiefs. Although utterly disfigured, the Joker is quick to point out that he is «a lot happier» (00:36:21)\(^23\) now than before. His outfit visually matches this newly happy state of mind. Whereas before he was appropriately dressed in suit and tie, his new attire oozes the spirit of carnival. A mixture between a clown and a fool, his face is painted fittingly with white and red, the suit is of a deep purple and he even wears a little flower pinned to his suit. After having killed Grissom because it was him who set Napier up, he starts his mischievous plans to take control over the city. Appropriately, the Joker chooses the anniversary parade to spread fear and terror: «with this anniversary festival, we run this city into the ground» (00:39:56).

The city’s and the Joker’s plan to use this festival for their own means can both be analyzed with Bakhtin’s theory about the carnival. Bakhtin repeatedly pointed out that a significant difference exists between an official feast and the medieval carnival. Whereas the former reinforces the already existing power hierarchies, only the latter has a potential to invert these structures: «The official feasts of the Middle Ages […] sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it [whereas] carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal»\(^24\). This dichotomy can be transposed onto Batman’s anniversary festival, which is appropriated by both the élite and the common people. Whereas the government wants to reinforce people’s faith in their leaders, the Joker simultaneously wants to bring about change and destroy Gotham’s rulers. His first public appearance as the Joker takes place when Grissom’s men hold a public speech and try to cover up their boss’ death. For the first time, the extent to which the Joker embodies the carnival becomes visible. First, a few street artists, clad in striped black and white outfits, start to dance around the listening public. All of a sudden the Joker appears, dressed in a checkered suit adorned with

\(^{23}\) The following time indications refer to \textit{Batman} (1989)

\(^{24}\) Bakhtin 1965, 9-10.
a rose, wearing a black bowler and sporting his clownesque green hair under his hat. He takes out a peacock’s feather, rams it into the throat of the speaker and then his entourage opens fire onto the rest of the people. Even though it is not yet time for carnival, the Joker dresses up as a fool all the time and as such corresponds to Bakhtin’s description of fools and clowns: «They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of the carnival season […] they were not actors playing their parts on a stage […] but remained fools and clowns always and wherever»

The Joker is further underlined by the connotations of the playing card of the Joker. This special card can usually be played at any point of time in a game of cards and is considered to be a wild card, meaning that it can both be beneficial or harmful for the player. Regarding the Joker in BATMAN, the movie’s villain resembles the playing card because he is some sort of wild card as well. Always ready to instigate trouble, the Joker can jump into action at any time: sometimes it leads him to success, sometimes his plans turn out to be more harmful to him than to his presumed victims.

With respect to the remainder of the movie, this scene is significant because it reveals the Joker’s malicious side and establishes his aesthetic appearance. The Joker’s next ploy takes place in a museum and gives a deeper insight into his motives. Ready «to make some art» (00:57:00) and eager «to broaden [their] minds» (00:59:13), the Joker and his friends arrive at the museum, where they destroy – or enhance? – the museum’s artifacts. Blasting loud music from a ghetto blaster, they dance along and gaily smack sculptures on the floor and destroy paintings by smearing and spraying other paint over them. Having tricked the photojournalist Vicky Vale, who is in town to track down the mysterious Batman, into coming to the museum, the Joker wants her to witness the destruction of the museum and the first implementation of his «philosophy». Considering himself the «world’s first fully-functioning homicidal artist» (01:02:00), he makes art «until someone dies» (01:02:02). His fondness of gruesome

Bakhtin 1965, 8.
art is further revealed when he praises Vicky for her photographs she took during a civil war and thus wants her to join this «avant-garde of the new aesthetic» (01:24:46) and record his work. One piece of work he wants to challenge Vicky with is Alicia, his girlfriend, who «has been made over in line with [his] new philosophy» (01:03:03). Although a rather morbid philosophy, the Joker clearly wants to install this new way of thinking in lieu of the establishment's one. His destruction – or according to the Joker, enhancement – of the paintings and sculptures, which all belong to the category of high culture, can certainly be read as an integral part of this new philosophy. Same as Bakhtin interpreted the medieval carnival as anti-establishment and as belonging to the folk culture, the Joker destroys the high culture of Gotham's élite. Preserved and consecrated in the museum, the artifacts embody the very hierarchy the Joker wants to destroy. As such, his ramblings about a new aesthetic cannot simply be dismissed as the utterances of a mentally ill person. Rather, they bear witness to the renewal and regeneration he wants to bring into effect. Whereas in the Renaissance, this potential for change was mostly limited to the time of the carnival, the Joker brings this regenerative force to the everyday life outside the carnival. Even though his methods are very violent, both the people of the medieval carnival and the Joker dream of bringing forward something better and getting rid of the hierarchical structures at work. As such, the destruction of the paintings can be read as being emblematic for the Joker's attempts to overturn the élite. However, the final blow to Gotham's government will come later, namely at the big anniversary parade. Nevertheless, the scene at the museum can be read as an important step in the Joker's attempt to gain control because he literally shatters the symbols that represent the government's pretense to be something special, namely the élite.

The key scene after the museum's destruction is Gotham's 200th anniversary parade. This event is significant because it is appropriated by both sides, namely by the government as well as by the Joker. As mentioned above, Gotham tries to consolidate its reign whereas the Joker wants to use the parade as a platform to establish his own philosophy. Shortly before the parade is scheduled to start, Gotham's government is forced to
postpone the birthday gala because they simply «cannot guarantee public safety» (01:24:06). The Joker seizes this TV speech as an opportunity to establish himself in the public's eye and thus jams the broadcast's signal and brings forward his own speech. Referring to his own appearance and former scams, he admits that he «can be theatrical» (01:24:33) and even a bit rough, but one thing he is not is a killer. Instead, he is an «artist» (01:24:42). However, as people have perceived him wrongly up to now, he wants to win them over. The way by which he wants to get people on his side is by giving them the festival they had hoped for so badly. Announcing his plans for the anniversary parade, the Joker exclaims «commence au festival» (01:24:53) and reveals his surprise for Gotham City: «At midnight, [he] will dump $20 million in cash on the crowd» (01:25:02). Further promising that «there will be entertainment» (01:25:19), the Joker singlehandedly replaces Gotham's government by responding to the people's need for a carnival. Furthered by the money as an incentive, the people readily believe the Joker's claim not to be a killer. At the evening of the carnival, the Joker sets up a huge parade: himself and his entourage riding on a ginormous cake that spells «200», they dance along to the tune of Prince's music. Led by a massive balloon in the figure of a clown, the Joker celebrates himself as the new leader of Gotham. Visually, this parade is very reminiscent of a carnival: There is loud music, gay colors, the Joker is dressed up in his usual colorful outfit and the people giddily assemble around the procession. However, as soon as Batman shows up, the Joker's real intentions are revealed. Spying Batman's mobile in the sky, the Joker tells his people to set the lethal gas free, which is stored in the balloons. Telling the «little people» that he will relieve them «of the burden of [their] useless lives» (01:35:16), the Joker shows his true colors. First, he basks in the glory of the cheering public, and then, while setting the poison gas free, he delivers a speech to the people where he reveals his cruel and evil side. Up to the parade, the Joker has displayed his carnevalesque side mostly through his appearance as well as through the different attacks he staged. However, the parade is the highlight of the Joker's plan because this is the platform he needs in order to regenerate Gotham according to his plan.
As Bakhtin states several times, the medieval carnival was a special time because for a couple of days, the existing power hierarchies were suspended: «All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities» 26. This interpretation can be transposed onto the Joker’s appropriation of the carnival: it is at this special occasion that he hopes to overcome the prevailing authority and implement a new one. Nevertheless, this new reign he wants to install is very different from what Bakhtin attributed to the medieval carnival. In fact, whereas Bakhtin saw the carnival as an opportunity to overcome the rigid class system of the middle ages, the Joker attempts to install a brutal terror-regime with him on top. The Joker’s laughter, which is hauntingly evil, can be said to be the very embodiment of this brutal regime as it has no healing intent at all. Rather, it is a direct foil to the laughter Bakhtin described in Rabelais and His World as it shows the Joker’s malicious and malevolent character. Instead of giving people a freer and more equal society, he only attempts to replace one despotic system by another. Thus, the Joker’s laughter clearly transcends what Bakhtin attributed to the healing laughter of the medieval carnival. In fact, it is the direct opposite of the carnevalesque laughter Bakhtin described and as such is the ultimate perversion of the curative spirit of the carnival.

Summarizing, the birthday parade at the movie’s end brings this perversion to the surface and shows how the Joker tries to appropriate the carnival’s regenerative spirit. The anniversary is the perfect occasion for the Joker to instigate a revolution and overthrow the system in power. Under the disguise of a carnival he tricks people into attending his coup and then reveals his true colors. Nevertheless, he does not succeed because Batman is able to thwart the Joker’s plan and saves Gotham City yet another time. After the final battle, Gotham goes back to its previous state and thus, as described by Bakhtin as well, the return to normalcy occurs. Concluding, the Joker can be said to pursue his goal of ruling Gotham City through abusing the anniversary parade and its spirit in order to establish his rule.

26 Bakhtin 1965, 11.
The Penguin and The Grotesque Body

**Batman Returns** (1992) shows several parallels with **Batman** with respect to their carnevalesque qualities. The most apparent parallel is the one between the Joker and the Penguin: the Penguin is similarly the movie’s antagonist who tries to put Gotham’s government out of power in order to establish his own reign. Whereas in **Batman** it was the anniversary parade, in **Batman Returns** it is Christmas and its related festivities that serve as the platforms the Penguin appropriates for his own aims. As will be shown henceforth, the Penguin can also be interpreted by means of Bakhtin’s concept of the carnevalesque: The Penguin’s entourage resembles the fools of a carnival, his living room in the sewers looks like a circus and the several attacks he stages refer to carnival as they are always full of colors, confetti and clownsque characters.

Already within the first few minutes of the movie, the topic of the carnival is established because apparently, it is Christmas time in Gotham City. The huge Christmas tree in the middle of the market square, the people bustling around with bags full of presents and the ubiquitous Santa Clause all serve to establish the festive mood that the people of Gotham find themselves in. Max Shreck, the influential industrialist, is in the middle of discussing his new power plant, when he and the city’s mayor have to go down to the people in order to light the Christmas tree. Tellingly, Max Shreck says to his companions that it is time to «bring joy to the masses» (00:08:34)

In Bakhtinian terms, this can be interpreted as an allowed carnival brought to the people by its élite:

«Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms and prohibitions.»

Moreover, although official feasts betrayed the true spirit of carnival, this spirit itself is «indestructible [and thus] had to be tolerated and

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27 The following time indications refer to **Batman Returns** (1992)
28 Bakhtin 1965, 9.
even legalized outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace."\textsuperscript{29} In this very marketplace the élite, the popular people and the Penguin clash for the first time: Max Shreck and the city’s officials want to give the people joy and reinforce «the existing pattern»\textsuperscript{30}, whereas the Penguin and his followers (mis)use this occasion in order to overturn the existing hierarchy. The Penguin’s attack appears in visual terms to be very carnevalesque: Hidden in a huge present, he and his entourage jump out and start attacking the people and Max Shreck. All of the Penguin’s men are dressed as different characters from carnival: some are clowns, some are dressed as skeletons, a man shoots out of his street organ, monkeys run rampant and a man disguised as a devil lights a Teddy Bear. Luckily, Batman appears and is able to defeat the attackers and save Gotham’s people. Max Shreck however is able to flee the scene and finds himself in a deserted alley. With a swoop, he suddenly falls down a shaft and finds himself in the Penguin’s underworld.

In this following scene, the carnevalesque is strongly represented on a visual level: The Penguin’s entourage, all still dressed up from the attack, sit quietly in the background while he bargains with Shreck. Sitting on chair that resembles a throne, he pulls incriminating evidence out of a Christmas sock: first documents that prove that Shreck’s green plant is in fact very harmful for the environment, then the Penguin extracts from the Christmas sock a cut off hand of a business partner that Shreck has murdered. Bribing Shreck with this damning evidence, the Penguin claims that he is ready to «ascend» (00:19:34) to the real world and wants «recognition of [his] humanity» (00:20:00). Growing up with the penguins that lived in the sewers, the Penguin outwardly resembles a penguin very much: flappers instead of fingers and a nose resembling a bird’s beak. Dressed in a vest and a tailcoat, he looks every bit of a penguin. However, whereas the Joker’s attire and appearance is cheerful yet proper, the Penguin seems very repellent and revolting. With respect

\textsuperscript{29} Bakhtin 1965, 9.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 9.
to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, the grotesque is a concept that he considers as significant for the medieval carnival. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body refers to «the body as unbounded, in transformation [and] materially linked to its past and its future». Since «it is the people's body»31, the Penguin's desire to belong to Gotham's people is also represented through his body's materiality. Throughout the movie, the Penguin, referred to as «the grotesque Penguin-man living in the sewers» (00:05:37), is seen eating, spitting, bleeding and vomiting, all of which in a very revolting fashion. Therefore, the grotesqueness of his body is already established in the first meeting between the Penguin and Shreck. The fact that he lives in a place where the waste – excrements, toxics and garbage – of Gotham's people is disposed of, adds only to the grotesque quality of the Penguin. Moreover, he is only able to blackmail Shreck because he finds the incriminating evidence in the sewers: the toxics of his plant, the shredded documents and Shreck's murdered partner's body.

Thus, the difference between the élite and the Penguin as one of the common people is both highlighted by the Penguin's body and the place he lives in. Shreck, under pressure because of the damning evidence, thus promises the Penguin to introduce him into Gotham's society and help him find his parents. The occasion the two choose to introduce the Penguin could not be more telling: It is at a speech the mayor holds in order to address the chaos that has recently plagued Gotham. Referring to this mayhem, the mayor says that he does not «care what cynics say, this is the Christmas season [and] it should be a time of healing» (00:32:50). In this very moment, a clown appears, steals the mayor's baby and jumps down a shaft. Hiding down in the shaft is the Penguin who takes the baby and brings it back to the mayor. This action is not only highly staged, but also bears witness to the carnevalesque as the Penguin 'travels' on a huge, yellow duck which lifts him through the shaft up to Gotham's élite. Shreck, conveniently present at the speech, already awaits the Penguin and introduces him to Gotham's public. In a rare moment,

31 Dentith 1995, 80.
the Penguin stands alongside Shreck, thus uniting the popular with the élite. Claiming that he only wants to reclaim his birthright, the Penguin is welcomed into Gotham’s society and they seemingly acknowledge his humanity. As Shreck sees a chance to gain even more power, he talks the Penguin into running for the mayor’s position. In order to strengthen his bid as running for mayor, the Penguin secretly organizes an attack on the city, only to blame the current mayor for this. The attack once again is heavily stylized as all of the Penguin’s men are dressed up in carnival gear: they are dressed as clowns and fools, wear bowler hats, sport trousers striped in red and white and their faces are painted in different colors. A little pink poodle even carries a hand grenade into a store, which shortly after explodes. Once again, Batman shows up and stops the clowns before the damage gets too serious. The Penguin subsequently blames the mayor for not gaining control over this «disease that turned eagle scouts into crazed clowns» (01:00:00).

His plan however is a lot more sinister. Instead of replacing a mayor seemingly incapable of running Gotham and bringing the city back onto its right path, the Penguin in fact wants to bring terror over the city, revenge his parents’ disposal of him and get rid of the city’s hero, namely Batman. Similar to Batman, a festivity provides the platform the Penguin needs in order to achieve his goals. Whereas in Batman it was the anniversary parade, this time around the Tree Lightning Ceremony makes sure that Gotham’s élite as well as the common people are present. In a first step, he lures Batman onto a rooftop, pushes a woman down and makes it seem like Batman was the one who threw her off the roof. Thereby, he achieves one of his goals, namely the defamation of Batman. Later, he manipulates Batman’s car, hoping the superhero dies. Miraculously, Batman survives, leaving the Penguin fuming with rage. Shreck tries to consolidate the Penguin, telling him that the time has come for something new: «The point is, listen… They’ve lost faith in old symbols. They are ready to bond with you, the icon of the future» (01:23:25).

This faith in old symbols is exactly what Bakhtin says is discarded and neglected during the carnival and replaced by a regenerative spirit. There-
fore the Penguin, similar to the Joker, can be interpreted as appropriating a feast in order to implement a new hierarchy. However, the Penguin’s plan comes to a halt when Batman manipulates the Penguin’s speech at which he is campaigning for his bid as a mayor. Instead of making the people believe that he only wants their best, his evil side is unmasked and the people learn what he really thinks of them. Now, robbed of his chance to become mayor and again excluded from society, Shreck turns away from the Penguin as well. Therefore, the enraged Penguin turns onto the noble élite, starting with crashing Shreck’s ball later that evening. While the rich people, wearing expensive Venetian masks, are dancing and amusing themselves, an explosion suddenly rips through the floor. In the mist of the detonation, the Penguin slowly emerges on his huge yellow duck. Announcing that his troops are fanning the city and stealing all first-born sons while they «can get dressed up like jerks, get juiced and dance badly» (01:35:12), he takes Max Shreck hostage and takes him down to the sewers with him. For once, however, it is not the Penguin that stages a chaos resembling carnival, but in turn disturbs a private sort of carnival. Gotham’s wealthy élite amuses itself far away from Gotham’s real troubles at Shreck’s Christmas party. This time around, they are the ones wearing masks when the Penguin interrupts their festivities. This sort of feast only underlines the élite’s arrogance, as they seem unfazed by Gotham’s troubles. In his final attack on said élite, the Penguin equips thousands of penguins with missiles and sends them to the market square where a huge detonation should extinguish Gotham’s inhabitants. In his motivational speech to his armada, the Penguin tells them that they all «stand on a great threshold» (01:38:43) and that «the Liberation of Gotham has begun» (01:39:22). The little penguins walk towards the plaza, their march resembling a huge carnival parade. In terms of stylistic means, this parade can be interpreted as a mise-en-abyme, namely a parade within a parade. In the bigger context of the festivities, the penguin parade is a visual representation of the regenerative force of the carnival as described by Bakhtin. Although a lethal – yet renewing – force, they are on their way to extinguish Gotham’s citizens and thus would make room for a new generation. As expected
however, Batman is able to make the penguins turn back and avert the
destruction of the city. In the following final battle between Catwoman,
Batman and the Penguin, Gotham is finally saved when the Penguin is
defeated. While Catwoman and Batman fight Max Shreck down in the
cave, the Penguin appears for a last time. Moments before his death, he
rises up from the sewers, black blood and sewage gushing from his mouth,
and tries to kill Batman with a last effort of strength. However, he fails
and falls back into the sewers. This last scene of the «ghastly grotesque»
(01:24:16) marks the end of the Penguin and the return to normalcy. This
return is underlined by the fact that the Penguin returns to the place
where he came from, namely the underworld. It is where he rose up
from and is also where he finds his death. Max Shreck in turn, who also
dies during the final battle scene, falls from the heights of Gotham’s élite
to the bottom of the city’s society. The final showdown thus produces
two pairings, the Penguin and Max Shreck who lose and come out on
the bottom, Catwoman and Batman who prevail and come out on top.
With them saving Gotham, the expected return to normalcy occurs.
During the time of festivities and Christmas, the Penguin almost managed
to overthrow the city’s power hierarchies. Similar to the Joker in BATMAN,
the Penguin outwardly aligns himself to the colorful and gay spirit of
the carnival, but in fact has an equally sinister plan in mind. Whereas
the aesthetics of BATMAN RETURNS clearly correspond to the Bakhtinian
interpretation of the carnival, the spirit in which the Penguin ploys his
actions are a departure of the renewing nature Bakhtin attributed to the
carnival. Thus, Tim Burton can be said to replace the healing nature of
the carnival with a far more evil and malicious version. Whereas the
Penguin not only adheres aesthetically to the carnival, but also appro-
priates the festivities of Christmas in order to further his interests, he
departs in one important point from the Bakthinian interpretation of
the medieval carnival, namely in the carnevalessque spirit that originally
envisioned a more just society. Instead, the Penguin wants to install a
reign that similar to the old one oppresses its subjects. Luckily, Batman is
able to restore order and the movie thus ends accordingly with Batman’s
butler wishing him Merry Christmas.
Selina Kyle: From Secretary to Superheroine

Catwoman, at last, is the least obvious carnevalesque character out of all three. Whereas both the Joker and the Penguin visually represent the carnival through their unique looks, the stylized attacks they stage and their dressed-up entourage, Catwoman embodies the carnevalesque rather on the level of content instead of on the surface level. Nevertheless, same as the Penguin and the Joker, she uses the festivities of Christmas as an occasion to further her goals. Selina Kyle’s turn towards the carnevalesque only starts with her transformation into Catwoman, thus with Max Shreck’s attempt to murder her. Before, Selina Kyle was a mousy, shy and self-conscious secretary who was constantly verbally abused by her male superiors at work. After her resurrection by cats, she turns into quite the opposite, namely a strong woman who completely breaks with her own life, strikes back at her former suppressors and establishes herself as a force to be reckoned with in Gotham City. Therefore, Catwoman can be said to take full advantage of the spirit of carnival in order to live out and realize its utopian potential. According to Bakhtin, the function of the carnival spirit is the following:

«To consecrate inventive freedom […], to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world [and to enter a completely new order of things. »32

With respect to Catwoman, this is exactly what she aspires to do, namely the liberation from prevailing points of view and to enter a new order of things. The prevailing points of view being that women are subordinate to men, generally less intelligent and need to be in relationships that adhere to society’s stereotypical conception about gender roles. In Batman Returns, these clichés are all alluded to, however, only before Selina Kyle’s metamorphosis into Catwoman. The first scene where Selina Kyle appears as a character is at the conference held in Max Shreck’s

32 Bakhtin 1965, 34.
office. Duly serving coffee to the gentlemen, she suddenly attempts to make a suggestion concerning the problem the men have been discussing. Max Shreck turns around and looks at her wide-eyed, – as if he had heard her talking for the first time –, and ridicules her attempt to say something intelligent by telling his partners that he is afraid that they «haven’t properly housebroken Miss Kyle» (00:08:15). «In the plus column though, she makes a hell of a cup of coffee» (00:08:22). Later, after she gets home from this draining day of work, she listens to her voice-mail, only to be asked by her mother «why [she] insists on languishing in Gotham City as a lowly secretary» (00:23:19). Max Shreck finally gets rid of his assistant when she proves to be too intelligent for him and figures out his plans for a power capacitor. Asking her «What did curiosity do to the cat?» (00:26:05), he pushes her out of a window and thereby creates his future enemy and avenger.

After her rebirth as Catwoman, she roams the city, both looking for an opportunity to take revenge on Shreck as well as making herself a name as fearless superwoman. The first opportunity for action offers itself when she spies a man trying to rape a young woman, thus hurrying to her rescue. However, it is in this scene when it comes apparent that Catwoman does not necessarily fight for the greater good, but rather for herself. When the woman wants to thank Catwoman for rescuing her, the superheroine tells the young girl «that [she] makes it so easy» (00:41:44). Alluding to the feminist debate of the 90s that discussed whether women sometimes provoked sexual harassment because of their alluring clothing, Catwoman tells the young woman off. Further supporting the fact that Catwoman mainly fights for herself is her jealousy of Batman, who is stealing her limelight. In order make herself the only superheroine of Gotham, she strikes a deal with the Penguin who also feels that Batman is getting too much attention. In her several encounters with Batman, the two fight each other, almost killing their respective opponent. In one particular scene, Catwoman knowingly plays with the gender stereotypes at work. When Batman hits her, she falls to the ground, seemingly hurt, and asks him: «How could you? I’m a woman» (00:57:40). This in turn makes Batman apologize for his deed,
only to realize that Catwoman was playing with him when she catches him off guard and strikes back. In this verbal – and physical – exchange, it becomes apparent that Catwoman negotiates the gender debate mainly through her own figure. Instead of standing up for all women, she fights for herself and tries to break with her old life. In Bakhtinian terms, Catwoman is the epitome of a person who uses the time of the carnival in order to bring about change and regeneration. Nevertheless, whereas Bakhtin meant that this change concerned a whole society or cast at least, Catwoman brings about a change that is solely personal.

However, it is notable that Catwoman breaks with her old life in all respects but one. Whereas she liberates herself from any social restraints, she does not achieve any sort of sexual liberation. Carnival has often been connoted with sexual promiscuity as it allowed people to act upon their sexual drives during this restricted amount of time. Although Selina Kyle always complained about the lack of men in her life, Catwoman does nothing to change this fact. Quite the contrary, she and Batman never have sexual intercourse, thus one thing of Catwoman's past as Selina Kyle remains the same. While Catwoman knowingly uses her provocative and sexually connoted attire to manipulate people, such as the Penguin, she never acts upon her own sexual needs. Why she does not do this is rather obscure, but it could very well be that her love for Batman restricts her from any promiscuous behavior. Although she rejects Batman in the end, it is apparent that she is in love with him. While she gains absolute freedom and liberation through the rejection of Batman in terms of dependency on men, her sexual liberation has not materialized by the end of the movie. Given the fact, however, that Catwoman is the only one who transforms permanently into her 'new' self, one might speculate that sooner or later she will achieve sexual liberation.

Nevertheless, of all three carnevalesque characters analyzed in this paper, she is the most successful in bringing «forth something more and better».

33 Bakhtin 1965, 20.
low self-esteem, she breaks with her old life and becomes a self-assured woman who stands up for herself. The culmination of her liberating efforts is the final showdown between her and Max Shreck. Shortly before Shreck is killed, he begs Catwoman to let him go and promises her everything she wants, «money, jewels, a very big ball of string» (01:47:09). However, since Catwoman thinks that «the law does not apply to people» (01:47:44) like him, she sees no other way than killing him. Although Batman begs her to let Shreck go, she does not cave and kills him with an electric shock. Shortly before she kills Shreck, she even calls him «Santi Clause» (01:50:25), thus alluding a last time to the festive spirit Gotham finds itself in. Therefore, Catwoman’s emancipation can be interpreted as a full realization of the potential for change that the carnival offers since she equally manages to create a new life for herself as well as inverting the power hierarchy. Whereas Selina Kyle as a secretary embodies both the common people and the subaltern woman, Shreck simultaneously represents the noble élite and the male hegemony. In a carnevalesque turn, Catwoman manages to invert this power hierarchy and trumps over her nemesis. However, Catwoman’s insistence that she must kill Shreck because the system works differently for him, at the same time challenges Bakhtin’s claim that the carnival can bring about change and renewal for a whole society. Instead, she believes that the law cannot touch people like Shreck, thus reinforcing society’s status before carnival, a status in which the noble élite is in the possession of power. Nevertheless, her struggle for independence can be read as the successful realization of a second life, thus entering «the utopian realm of […] freedom and equality»\textsuperscript{34}. Revenging herself on Shreck and even rejecting Batman’s amorous advances, she completely detaches herself from her old life. Even more so, Catwoman manages to create a life that outlasts the restricted time of carnival and continues to realize the utopia of freedom and equality.

\textsuperscript{34} Bakhtin 1965, 9.
The Carnevalesque: The Red Thread in Batman and Batman Returns

Through the examples of the Joker, the Penguin and Catwoman, it has been shown how Burton’s Batman and Batman Returns can be analyzed through Bakhtin’s theory about the carnevalesque. In both movies, the topic of carnival is a recurrent theme and runs through them like a thread. The two festive occasions – the 200th anniversary of Gotham and Christmas – are the catalysts for the three antagonists and provide them with the platform they need in order for them to reach their goals. However, whereas the Joker, the Penguin and Catwoman share their appropriation of the carnival spirit for the purpose of furthering their aims, the way they appropriate the festivities and exhibit carnevalesque qualities differ very much. The Joker’s outfit and appearance is the most reminiscent of carnival as he looks like a fool, yet his philosophy is a perverted version of what Bakhtin described as the carnival spirit. His ulterior-goal, namely the establishment of a brutal regime over Gotham City and the subsequent murdering of its citizens, is revealed at the anniversary parade. Albeit Batman is able to hinder him from doing that, the last scene shows how the Joker cleverly makes use of the festive spirit, namely by giving the people the parade they wanted – and thus a timely restricted liberation from the official culture.

The Penguin as well makes use of the Gotham’s festive spirit, namely the Christmas season. Stealing all first-born sons during Shreck’s party as well as trying to kill Batman and eradicating Gotham’s citizens at the evening of the Christmas tree lightning, the Penguin tries to bring about his idea of regeneration and renewal during the yuletide season. The Joker and the Penguin therefore similarly try to «invert hierarchies and undermine boundaries»35 during the time of carnival.

Catwoman however, although she certainly exhibits carnevalesque qualities, differs the most. Not only is she visually the least reminiscent of carnival, she also mostly works alone and has no entourage in tow; contrary to the Penguin and the Joker whose men consist of people

35 Dentith 1995, 74.
dressed up as clowns and fools. More importantly however, Catwoman is more concerned with bringing about a change that is solely personal. Not interested in changing Gotham’s whole society, Catwoman breaks with her old life and emancipates into a strong and independent woman. Taking revenge on her former boss Max Shreck, and choosing to be alone instead of having a relationship, Catwoman is able to create a real second life for herself; a life that is not only a utopian realm. However, as carnival is only restricted to a limited amount of time, the return to normalcy usually occurs after the days of feasting. In both movies, the festivities go hand in hand with the regenerative efforts of the protagonists, after which the return to the status quo ensues.

Concluding, Batman and Batman Returns present both on a visual and a contextual level a cinematic application of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory about the carnevalesque. The three main protagonists – the Joker, the Penguin and Catwoman – make use of the regenerative spirit of carnival «in order to bring forth something more and better»36 in Gotham City.

36 Bakhtin 1965, 21.
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Further Reading