

**The Image of Modernity in Carnival:
Shanghai Halloween 2023**

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Abstract

This essay explores the subtle relationship between carnival transgression and modernity through the 2023 Halloween celebrations in Shanghai. It was served as a spontaneous act of defiance against the rigid biopolitical controls of the pandemic era. Drawing on theoretical insights related to modernity, carnival, and transgression, the essay situates the carnival as a temporal challenge to modern order, where symbols of authority, such as the Big Whites, were parodied to strip them of their disciplinary power. Carnival's inclusive, unstructured nature fosters a collective space for rebellion and emotional release, temporarily breaking from the constraints of modernity's rationalized frameworks. The essay argues that modernity's critical essence is both challenged and reaffirmed in these moments of transgression, as the carnival uncovers repressed tensions while gesturing toward alternative possibilities. However, the eventual prohibition of the 2024 Halloween in Shanghai highlights the fragile and contested nature of these spaces. Ultimately, this article argues that carnival-like transgressive behavior enables individuals to experience a fleeting and ephemeral sense of modernity. This experience allows modernity to reclaim its capacity for self-critique within the boundaries imposed by modern politics.

On Halloween night 2024, the streets of Shanghai were filled with an atmosphere of tension, as a heavy police presence enforced restrictions. Over the past two decades, driven by concerns over cultural and identity anxieties, Chinese authorities have deliberately sought to downplay the influence of Western holidays in favour of promoting the primacy of national festivals and a collective sense of cultural identity. Nonetheless, rarely has there been such an overt and severe prohibition on the celebration of a particular holiday. This unprecedented action can be traced back to the previous year's spontaneous Halloween celebrations, which made the machinery of power feel threatened.

In 2023, Shanghai experienced its first Halloween following the lifting of COVID-19 lockdowns, and many young people took to the streets. On this day, individuals shed the repression and fear of the pandemic era, reclaiming personal freedom through costumes and revelry. Among the most striking costumes was the satirical imitation of the "Big Whites", a term that had come to symbolise healthcare and administrative personnel during the pandemic. These individuals, clad in uniform white protective suits, surrendered their physical presence to the apparatus of power, which institutionalised their roles and transformed them into symbols of authority. Isolated from the public, their appearance signified discipline, order, and control. It is easy to associate their presence with the imagery of militarised forces or police agencies. As Giorgio Agamben warns, "Once terrorism was exhausted as a justification for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic could offer the ideal pretext for broadening such measures beyond any limitation."¹

Compared to overt violence, pandemic-related personnel exercised a far-reaching form of biopolitical discipline. During the pandemic, Chinese authorities implemented some of the

¹ Giorgio Agamben, "The State of Exception Provoked by an Unmotivated Emergency" *Positions Politics*, February 26, 2020, <https://positionspolitics.org/giorgio-agamben-the-state-of-exception-provoked-by-an-unmotivated-emergency/>.

most stringent public health measures in the world, underpinned by regulations tailored to the state of exception. It was a period of anomie that breaks and temporarily subverts the social order.²First, individual mobility was rendered entirely transparent and subject to surveillance. Any outdoor activity, especially intercity travel, was closely monitored. At the peak of the pandemic, even leaving one's home or shopping online was prohibited, with all essential supplies distributed directly by the government. Second, nucleic acid testing was employed with exceptional frequency. During lockdowns, nearly all residents were required to provide daily test samples. These measures established a rigid and preordained hierarchy within the state of exception. Personal health privacy was nonexistent; one's risk status was digitally recorded and tied to an electronic ID. Citizens were categorised as "healthy," "high-risk," or "infected," and this stratification was spatially reinforced: healthy individuals were confined to their homes, high-risk individuals to temporary quarantine centres, and patients to makeshift hospitals.

Testing stations, quarantine sites, and makeshift hospitals emerged as temporary disciplinary spaces under the state of exception. The true reason why humans were separated from each other was not the physical or formal lines, but rather, the increasing distrust that grew amongst them. The policy of separation between the different classes was main reason of distrust and suspicion. The way people were stigmatized as high-risk cases was the most straightforward method to make them feel like outcasts within the community. Generating panic from the authorities about the virus had a snowball effect which, in the end, left the risky population of the society as an object for which communities either ostracize or stigmatize. At the heart of social panic lies intrinsic tendencies that are mainly responsible for how humans will react in a given set of events. When panic arises in times of difficulty, it exposes the hidden beliefs of people and points to the specific targets of their distrust. Times of severe plague outbreaks were known to accompany religious crises that shaped the Christian world. In the case in point, these stereotypes caused a wave of enmity with the Jewish community. Jews were said to have poisoned wells and personally spread the plague through their magic, which lead to violent persecutions and mass killings. This practice is supported by extreme religious beliefs. Those who effect change feel they are soldiers of God and, therefore, feel they can do whatever is necessary to remove the threat.

This violence, however, first occurred inwardly before it was inflicted on others, manifesting as illusions imposed upon themselves. A Christian, for example, had to recognise the legitimacy of Christianity's paradigm before being justified in extending the same violence to others. In the story of the Wandering Jew, a Jew mocked Jesus on His way to crucifixion and was subsequently cursed to wander the earth without rest until the second coming of the Messiah.³This Jew truly began his endless wandering, believing in the hope of Christ's resurrection, and this wandering became a form of violence he inflicted upon himself. His wandering had no inherent meaning; in his illusion, God manifested His power through this ceaseless movement.

² Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 71

³ D. L. Ashliman, "The Wandering Jew," Pitt.edu, 2021, <https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type0777.html#stranger>.

When prayers could not bring health, and even clergy were not spared from infection, the Black Death shattered the imagined order people had relied upon. Yet, people did not question God but rather the intermediaries—the clergy. They sought ways to repair their connection to God and obtain a new, clearer illusion. Against this backdrop, the Flagellants rose rapidly. They took to the streets, performing public acts of self-flagellation and extreme penitence, attempting to express repentance to God through physical suffering and to atone for society's sins. This self-punishment was, in essence, an externalisation of their internal contradictions: through bodily pain, they sought to confirm God's presence and rebuild meaning. At the same time, their logic of violence extended beyond themselves, as they incited or directly engaged in violence against Jews. For them, this violence became another means of demonstrating their loyalty to their God.

Are we not, during the pandemic, living lives reminiscent of the Middle Ages? Whether it is the religious extremism of the Middle Ages or the enforcement of modern public health measures, both reflect the same logic: humanity, in pursuit of a cherished illusion, is willing to resort to externalised violence and internalised suffering. In contemporary times, this illusion underpins the social foundation constructed by what we call rational consensus. Even if reason and science have replaced religion as the dominant paradigm, panic reappears in crises, albeit in a new form. Agamben notes, “the state of fear, which in recent years has diffused into individual consciousnesses and which translates into a real need for states of collective panic, for which the epidemic once again offers the ideal pretext.”⁴

During the pandemic, the public use of reason was no longer possible. For Kant, when one is reasoning as a member of reasonable humanity, then the use of reason must be free and public.⁵ The fundamental reason for this was that reason shifted from being a critical tool to becoming an instrument of execution. In other words, reason transformed from an open state into a priori standards. These standards served the authorities, granting them the privilege of interpreting the state of exception. Originally, questioning was a necessary method of sustaining reason itself. Yet during the pandemic, those who questioned the state of exception were deemed irrational. The limitations imposed on the public use of reason meant that only within the authority-defined framework of "reason" could individuals exercise private reason. The countless instances of private reason constructed the illusion that reason was being publicly used. However, these private uses of reason were mere rituals of compliance with the established paradigm. Now we can understand Zygmunt Bauman's assertion about why global powers are bent on dismantling networks of social bonds.⁶ This is because the very process of forming social bonds inherently involves a logic of public use of reason, which creates a natural barrier against the infiltration of power.

It is essential to reexamine the concept of modernity. Hilde Heynen notes “modernity is also described as being a break with tradition, and as typifying everything that rejects the inheritance of the past”⁷, but we find that tradition awaits us in the future. Because the path to the future we envisioned before modernity has been blocked by the constraints imposed by

⁴ Agamben, “The State of Exception Provoked by an Unmotivated Emergency”

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 36-37.

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 14

⁷ Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity : A Critique* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mit Press, 1999), 1.

the power. The inability to use public reason, combined with collective panic, was the direct cause of the 2023 Shanghai Halloween becoming a stage for post-pandemic emotional release and social reflection. Although this carnival was spontaneous in terms of its timing and location, it implied the stage construction described in dramaturgical theory. China's pandemic control measures were extremely conservative, creating a kind of lag. While Western countries had announced the cessation of anti-pandemic measures, Shanghai's residents were still living under lockdown. This disparity drove people to channel their suppressed emotions into Halloween as a Western festival. In addition, the event's location, the former French Concession in Shanghai, was inherently a heterotopian space. To some extent, the concession, as a colonial legacy, represents a sense of historical continuity and stability, while the performances taking place there stand in opposition to the fluidity of power. Erving Goffman believes, "those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it."⁸ This space's heterogeneity, openness, and cultural hybridity corresponded to the rebellious nature of Halloween. People attempted to construct new spiritual supports for their collapsed illusions, drawing on frameworks provided by Western discourse. This was a radical appropriation. Shanghai's residents did not passively accept the original meaning of Halloween but, through the parody and remolding of its symbolic elements, transformed it into an expression of local social issues.

A festival provides a reason for people to gather, inspiring a collective desire to participate in public action. "Every festival has certain characteristics of a religious ceremony, even if it is of purely secular origin."⁹ Emile Durkheim described these religious characteristics as a temporary experience that transcends daily life. The final minute before the fireworks at midnight on New Year's Eve is identical in its temporal dimension to every other minute of the year, yet within the ritual of the countdown, this minute is imbued with a sense of the sacred. Everyone's attention converges on this single moment, and their minds begin to anticipate the same event. In this brief window of time, emotions become synchronised. In daily life, people experience two types of emotions: those tied to grand narratives and those that are private and fragmented. The significance of the New Year's countdown lies in its ability to transform these fragmented emotions—whether joy, regret, or anxiety from the past year—into a collective anticipation of the future. As the clock nears midnight, this feeling grows ever stronger. Durkheim described this state as "a state of effervescence—sometimes even delirium."¹⁰ It is in this state that a kind of repressed narrative finds its way back into expression.

We must distinguish this returning narrative from grand narratives, as it does not attempt to define a lasting social order. It manifests only for a single minute each year, even though its representation may appear grand. Bauman notes that "the carnival uncovered the "other side" of daily reality, a side which stayed constantly within reach but was normally concealed from

⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (University of Edinburgh, 1956), 13.

⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 386-387.

¹⁰ Ibid.

view and barred from touching.”¹¹Fredric Jameson reminds us of the ideological mechanisms hidden behind the return of narratives. He observes that “the very refusal and repudiation of narrative calls up a kind of narrative return of the repressed and tends in spite of itself to justify its anti-narrative position by way of yet another narrative the argument has every interest in decently concealing.”¹²If we are talking about an extended period, Jameson’s insight holds true—anti-narrative theories often rely on narrative frameworks to argue against the necessity of narratives. However, the narrative produced in the fleeting moment of the fireworks is not the type of fully formed narrative Jameson describes. In the instant of the explosion, what we experience is an intuitive sensation, a genuine feeling of farewell to the past. Strictly speaking, this is a pre-narrative sensation that we retrospectively frame as a narrative in order to preserve the memory of it. Yet, before this sensation can solidify into a clear narrative, it fades away with the end of the festival.

During the 2023 Shanghai Halloween celebrations, participants experienced a state of effervescence. This state was not limited to those physically present at the event; many others found resonance through videos and photos capturing the atmosphere. As Georges Bataille described, such “contagious impulses”¹³spread simultaneously on-site and across the internet. The most striking example of this was the aforementioned parody of the Big Whites. People dressed up as those who had once disciplined them, wearing white hazmat suits and wielding oversized cotton swabs, performing exaggerated throat-swabbing motions as if conducting nucleic acid tests on anyone they encountered. Those dressed as other characters enthusiastically played along.

It is impossible to know what those cosplaying as Big Whites were thinking internally, but their actions were undoubtedly absurd. This absurdity stems from the fact that when people saw them, they immediately associated them with the Big Whites’ role and actions during the pandemic, yet without the unease and fear elicited by actual Big Whites. If the Big Whites symbolise the machinery of power, then the act of parodying this figure involves stripping its signifier from its signified. Returning the Big White symbol to everyday use is no longer possible because its image is inseparably tied to the paradigm of power. Thus, it can only be reappropriated in a festive context, where its form is reclaimed through mockery. Agamben described two canonical features of parody: “the dependence on a preexistent model that is subsequently transformed from something serious into something comic, and the preservation of formal elements into which new and incongruous contents are introduced.”¹⁴Clearly, cosplaying as Big Whites is an excellent example of parody. Moreover, this kind of parody is arguably more effective than protests that carry an initial intent of subversion.

Another characteristic of the carnival is its inclusiveness. As long as one wears a mask, any emotion can be expressed during the same carnival. This is an unspoken agreement—no one will hold the performer accountable for satirizing them. Carnival, as described, “Nor is it set in motion by an order; it opens simply with a signal marking the beginning of merriment and

¹¹ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 98.

¹² Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (Verso, 2002), 5-6.

¹³ Georges Bataille, *Erotism : Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco, Calif.: City Lights Books, 1986), 41

¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books ; Cambridge, Mass, 2010), 39.

foolery.”¹⁵This makes carnival a spontaneous and unstructured social event. Even opposing social groups can participate with a shared purpose: they come to make jokes. In this moment, jokes become the central language of the carnival, encompassing everything and imbuing it with a spirit of equality. All the contradictions of daily life find a common mode of expression during this time.

The representatives of the machinery of power do not attend the carnival, and it is precisely their absence that enables the carnival to become a crucial outlet for release. Their presence would reverse the inverted daily power structures created through parody and mockery, rendering the festival indistinguishable from the everyday. We can imagine a scenario where a real king participates in a carnival by playing the role of a king. In this case, the effect of mockery could be neutralized by the authenticity of power. The king's presence ensures that, even within the festival, the symbol of the king remains at the center of power. The king's posture is deliberately relaxed, attempting to dilute the rebellious nature of the carnival. As a result, the order of the carnival is recaptured by the king. Therefore, we must recognize that playing one's role from one context within another context can cause the two contexts to overlap to some extent. For instance, during Shanghai's Halloween celebrations, if a Big White were to cosplay themselves, it would signify the machinery of power intervening in the festival by adopting a posture that diminishes its own sense of threat.

Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider modernity alongside the carnival. If the paradigm of challenging theology relied on bourgeois revolutions, then at least for a long time, such subversive revolutions will no longer be possible. This is because societies built upon capitalism, whether authoritarian or democratic, have already acquired a quasi-religious nature. Contemporary capitalist societies proclaim themselves as the ultimate manifestation of modernity. By controlling the discourse, they position modernity as their own creation, thereby absorbing modernity's original critical and creative essence and neutralizing alternative possibilities. Shouldn't the break we seek today be with this so-called modern political culture, which has been nurtured by capitalism? As Bauman states, “History of modernity is a history of tension between social existence and its culture. Modern existence forces its culture into opposition to itself. This disharmony is precisely the harmony modernity needs.”¹⁶The production of modernity stems from a mechanism of opposition. Thus, we cannot describe modernity as inherently optimistic or progressive. Bakhtin writes, “the crowning of the new always followed the uncrowning of the old, as triumph succeeded mockery.”¹⁷

Modernity's violent logic lies in its ability to first create conditions of opposition, prompting us to rebel against the very objects of violence it imposes, while simultaneously legitimizing our violent response. Naturally, we feel the impulse toward violence, as modernity continually suggests that defeating it will yield hidden treasures. Bataille observes, “There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds.”¹⁸And yet, those

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 246.

¹⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 10.

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 245.

¹⁸ Bataille, *Erotism : Death and Sensuality*, 40.

who challenge these bounds only feed the reproductive logic that modernity craves. During the Enlightenment, we discovered modernity within the spoils of violence. But today, modernity's spirit has internalized its own critical essence—though this essence has been obscured. Horkheimer and Adorno argue, “Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”¹⁹ The current paradigm has frozen the reproductive cycle of modernity, and as a result, our transgressive violent impulses have been suppressed. “The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual and in the scorn poured on the type of society which could make people into individuals.”²⁰ Thus, “Reason's old ambition to be purely an instrument of purposes has finally been fulfilled.”²¹

In everyday life, our role as the subjects of modernity's production has gradually diminished. The fear of myths during the Enlightenment mirrors the fear we experience during a pandemic. What truly unsettled Enlightenment advocates was the potential reality of miracles. Even the staunchest materialists cannot fully convince everyone that God does not exist, as humanity's deep-seated reverence for natural forces can be easily awakened by the slightest hint of a “miracle,” even if it is artificially constructed. In modern society, the fear stems from the uncertainty surrounding the transmission and progression of the virus, which brings a profound anxiety over loss of control and the possible collapse of modern order. When modern technology fails to perfectly predict the trajectory of a pandemic, the machinery of power resorts to telling a new contemporary myth. This new narrative reaffirms the legitimacy of modern technology while providing the public with clear emotional targets and behavioral norms. It is a heroic narrative, and the Big White has been thrust to the forefront as one of its heroes. This narrative portrays the Big Whites as bearing significant responsibilities and navigating complex identities in the fight against the pandemic. Their administrative actions are depicted as crucial to alleviating public fear, while they themselves, as ordinary citizens, face higher risks of infection. The Big Whites are described as noble and heroic, making any critique of them appear as overstepping boundaries under the framework of this heroic narrative.

The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it.²² Both transcendence and completion rely on the taboo as their foundation. Yet, for the subject, the moment of transgression offers a radically different experience of modernity, which is unmediated, free from retrospective interpretation, and untouched by ideological framing. This modernity has not yet been elevated to the level of the sublime; it exists in its raw, immediate form. This is precisely what we sensed during the Shanghai Halloween celebrations. The festival defines a temporal space where our understanding of modernity is reduced to something pure and intuitive. As Baudelaire once observed, this moment captures the fascination of the new²³. However, unlike Baudelaire's interest in the novelty of modern cities, the transgressive nature of the carnival creates a sense of wonder in the suspension of norms, which is a novelty born in a vacuum where order temporarily dissolves. Perhaps

¹⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944; repr., Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, 63.

²³ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (Penguin UK, 2010).

Adorno's evaluation of Schoenberg's music can help us describe this sensation. However, by the time Adorno wrote these words, this sensation had already become a retrospective experience. He said, "The genuinely revolutionary element in his music is the transformation of the function of expression. Passions are no longer faked; on the contrary, undisguised, corporeal impulses of the unconscious, shocks, and traumas are registered in the medium of music."²⁴

In addition, we should also be prepared for the possibility that once the carnival generates modernity, this pattern can be revoked at any moment. As mentioned earlier, in 2024, Shanghai prohibited all Halloween costume activities. This echoes traces left by history. Nearly 700 years ago, in 1349, Pope Clement VI condemned the activities of the Flagellants and ordered local authorities to suppress their processions. The actions of the Flagellants, seen from today's perspective, may not appear modern. But could they not have represented a form of modernity in the eyes of the Pope at that time? Thus, Foucault's statement becomes particularly illuminating: "whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history."²⁵ He further suggests, "it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of counter-modernity."²⁶

This struggle does not aim to take embryonic, fragmented elements labeled as postmodernity and treat them as revolutionary doctrines. The very naming of "postmodernity" already signifies a compromised failure to transgress boundaries. It first acknowledges its dependence on modernity and lacks the courage to break completely from it, which disqualifies it from being counter-modernity. When people are unable to articulate what postmodernity is, or what comes after postmodernity, rather than attributing this silence to the limitations of language, we might instead embrace this attitude and method. That is, to engage in parody and play during the carnival, relishing the unleashed and unpredictable moments of modernity's passion.

²⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis; London: University Of Minnesota Press, Cop, 2006), 35.

²⁵ Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 39.

²⁶ Ibid.

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