

TRANSFORMATION OF THE FEAST OF FOOLS: FROM CARNIVAL LAUGHTER TO MICKEY MOUSE'S EXPE- RIENCE

LA TRANSFORMACIÓN DE LA FIESTA DE LOS LOCOS: DESDE LA RISA DEL CARNAVAL A LA EXPERIENCIA DE MICKEY MOUSE

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is a critical evaluation of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival laughter's theory, and along the analysis of Walter Benjamin's notion of laughter, and its relation to modernity. While Bakhtin concentrates his attention on a few medieval festivities, this paper focuses on the "feast of fools" (festa stultorum) as a metaphor for carnival laughter. For Bakhtin, clown, joker, etc. represents Medieval and Renaissance carnival spirit, while an animated Mickey Mouse, alongside with Charlie Chaplin's movie character, appears in Benjamin's texts as a figure of modernity. Carnival laughter can be cruel, and it was cruel indeed, participated in violence during the festivities. The same cruelty Benjamin had found in a few fairy tales collected by the Brother Grimm. How cruelty and laughter are connected? The lack of common experiences in modernity was the reason why Bakhtin wanted to find a counterbalance to modern atomistic bourgeois society, and laughter could have given it. According to Bakhtin, the spirit of carnival as a collective laughter gradually dried up and in the 16th century it has self-transformed into a novel and became a genre of grotesque realism. For Benjamin, only epic, architecture and cinematograph are able to create the collective experience.

Key words: CARNIVAL; FEAST OF FOOLS; LAUGHTER; EXPERIENCE; FAIRY TALE; MICKEY MOUSE; POVERTY; BAKHTIN; BENJAMIN; CHAPLIN.

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Resumen: El objetivo del artículo es una evaluación crítica de la teoría de la risa de carnaval de Mikhail Bakhtin, y junto con el análisis de la noción de la risa de Walter Benjamin y su relación con la modernidad. Mientras Bakhtin concentra su atención en algunas festividades medievales, este artículo se centra en la “fiesta de los locos” (*fiesta stultorum*) como metáfora de la risa de carnaval. Para Bakhtin, payaso, bromista, etc. representan el espíritu de carnaval medieval y renacentista, mientras que un Mickey Mouse animado, junto con el personaje de la película de Charlie Chaplin, aparece en los textos de Benjamin como una figura de la modernidad. La risa de carnaval puede ser cruel, y de hecho fue cruel, participó en la violencia durante las festividades. La misma crueldad que Benjamin había encontrado en algunos cuentos de hadas recopilados por el hermano Grimm. ¿Cómo se conectan la crueldad y la risa? La falta de experiencias comunes en la modernidad fue la razón por la cual Bakhtin quería encontrar un contrapeso a la sociedad burguesa atomista moderna, y la risa podría haberlo dado. Según Bakhtin, el espíritu del carnaval como una risa colectiva se fue secando gradualmente y en el siglo XVI se transformó en una novela y se convirtió en un género de realismo grotesco. Para Benjamin, solo la épica, la arquitectura y el cinematógrafo pueden crear la experiencia colectiva.

Palabras clave: CARNAVAL; FIESTA DE LOS LOCOS; RISA; EXPERIENCIA; CUENTO DE HADAS; MICKEY MOUSE; POBREZA; BAKHTIN; BENJAMIN; CHAPLIN.

1. Introducción

Russian philosopher and literary scholar, who worked on literary theory, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 – 1975) and German–Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) have something in common, in spite the fact of their different destinies. Their thoughts are similarly marked by a sense of the fractured nature of specifically modern experience. First of all, both, Bakhtin and Benjamin, represent two different moods, respectively – *carnival laughter* and *melancholia*. On the basis of this statement, the authors are making an allusion to such works as *Rabelais and His World* (Творчество Франсуа Рабле и народная культура средневековья и Ренессанса, 1965), and *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928). Both thinkers were contemporaries and experienced a fatal effect of the totalitarian system: Bakhtin was persecuted by Stalin’s regime in Soviet Russia, while Benjamin, being a Jew, was forced to leave native Germany for France and finished his life by committing suicide. Likewise, both authors were the representatives of modernity and its rapid changing experience is reflected in their works.

In this article the authors are raising a hypothesis that Benjamin’s thinking can be interpreted as a dialogical partner to Bakhtin’s one. The comparison of their thinking is not a new question in the philosophical

discourse³ but usually such analyses are limited to the general principles of laughter theory, together with certain parallels, juxtapositions. Nevertheless, the main ideas of Bakhtin's theory of laughter will be presented briefly, and this will be done in order to make it easier to understand the main idea of the article – the transformation of the feast of fools.

The comparison has not yet been analyzed in the context of Benjamin's reflections about some of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, Walt Disney's cartoons and Charlie Chaplin's historic role in the becoming of modernity.

2. Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival Laughter

It is well-known that Bakhtin introduced the concept of carnival laughter by following the idea of Soviet Education commissioner Lunacharsky, *viz.*, laughter and comical creativity is the safest way to overcome social tensions. Moreover, laughter is a condition of possibility to see the truth. Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His world* writes:

The Renaissance conception of laughter can be roughly described as follows: laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter⁴.

Bakhtin also introduced a controversial concept of a carnival. For him, this concept in the primary sense refers to the practice of a “ritual performance” in which medieval people were actively involved (as opposed to a performance where they were only the viewers). According to Bakhtin, such a carnival lasted three months a year in certain cities of the Middle Ages⁵. These carnival holidays were “unofficial”, unconscious and non-political, like a second life, the second world beyond the official culture⁶. Their goal

[3] For instance, see: T. Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin. Experience and Form*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

[4] M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1984. P. 66.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

was to oppose the official truth, the already established “truth”, the dominant truth which was considered eternal and unquestionable⁷.

Bakhtin analyzes many medieval festivities and finds their relicts, *viz.*, carnivalisation, in François Rabelais’ novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. In this contribution the authors decided to use one name as a synonym of the carnival – *the feast of fools*. According to Bakhtin,

the “feasts of fools” (*feſta ſtultorum, fatuorum, follorum*) was celebrated by school men and lower clerics on the feast of St. Stephen, on New Year’s Day, on the feast of the Holy Innocents, of the Epiphany, and of St. John. These celebrations were originally held in the churches and bore a fully legitimate character. Later they became only semi-legal, and at the end of the Middle Ages were completely banned from the churches but continued to exist in the streets and in taverns where they were absorbed into carnival merriment and amusements. The feast of fools showed a particular obstinacy and force of survival in France (*fête des fous*). This feast was actually a parody and travesty of the official cult, with masquerades and improper dances. These celebrations held by the lower clergy were especially boisterous on New Year’s Day and on Epiphany⁸.

The main idea of this holiday is a peculiar short-term social revolution, in which power, dignity and impunity were given to those who are in a subordinate position.

In his book, *Rabelais and his world* (1965), Bakhtin emphasizes that on the feast day students of the Middle Ages discontinued the chain of gravity and fear of God. They escaped pressure from such grim categories as “eternal”, “immovable”, “absolute”, “immutable”, and instead showed them an entertaining and free world, its open and unfinished traits with the joy of change and renewal⁹. During the carnival, “real” life was suspended and turned upside down; The carnival was the second life, “organized by a laughter”, and was dedicated to the renewal of the world¹⁰.

According to Bakhtin,

in this remarkable apology, foolishness and folly, that is laughter, are directly described as ‘man’s second nature’ and are opposed to the monolith of the Christian cult and ideology. It was precisely the one-sided character of official

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

seriousness which led to the necessity of creating a vent for the second nature of man, for laughter¹¹.

However “[t]he carnival spirit (...) was gradually transformed into a mere holiday mood”¹². But the “spirit of the carnival” was still not lost in this process because, according to Bakhtin, it is indescribable¹³. Instead, he discovered his form of expression in the literature:

A special aspect of this process seems important. The literature of these later centuries was not directly subject to the popular festive culture and remained almost impervious to its influence. The carnival spirit and grotesque imagery continued to live and was transmitted as a now purely literary tradition, especially as a tradition of the Renaissance¹⁴.

Literature in all cultures of the world became carnivalized and the spirit of the carnival has distanced from the marketplace for centuries. It became a very noticeable factor in the reanimation of literature and literary genres. Rabelais is the case of the Renaissance, when the old carnival medieval spirit appears in the literature. Overwhelming carnival spirit is the opposite of atomic self-assembling conceptions of bourgeois existence¹⁵. For Bakhtin, collective experience is an important contrast to a modern atomic life. In his opinion, a laughter can create a collective experience and identity: “[t]he ever-growing, inexhaustible, ever-laughing principle which uncrowns and renews is combined with its opposite: the petty, inert ‘material principle’ of class society”¹⁶. Moreover, talking about medieval carnival, Bakhtin writes, that “laugh doesn’t build stakes”¹⁷. But the theory of decrowning, debunking laughter in Bakhtin’s writings raises the question of how much such laughter agrees on and even takes part in violence.

The ritual degradation of Jews was part of the festivities of the Roman carnival. One of the main aims of the *charivari*, a carnivalesque ritual which involved such activities as loud satirical singing outside individuals’ houses, and their enforced parade seated backwards on a donkey, was to

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[13] *Ibidem*.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[16] *Ibidem*.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

degrade people who had transgressed community's sexual norms. Carnival, of course, was not a source of violence in itself but its forms undoubtedly accompanied violence: laughter often accompanied those who were sent on the scrap. In a way, the participants of the carnival were hooligans. Benjamin finds the same cruelty in the fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, where joke and violence goes hand in hand together. What does it mean?

It is still important to look more closely at Benjamin's habilitation work *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, where he traverses the links between comic and *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin writes about comedy as a lining of tragedy. According to Ferber, "Benjamin's suggestive remark on comedy's role in *Trauerspiel* can be helpful in unfolding the relation between internal and external. In an almost incidental observation he compares comedy and *Trauerspiel* to a dress and its lining: "Comedy—or more precisely: the pure joke—is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt"¹⁸. This description is important because it presents the lining as what constitutes the fleeting border between inside and outside, or what stands between the body and the publicly visible dress fabric"¹⁹. So, for Benjamin, the dialectics between laughter and cruelty can create a real picture of reality, contrary to a quite idealistic notion of carnival in Bakhtin's theory. As we will see later it's a question of experience. Let's take a look to the fairy tale collected by the Brothers Grimm about a cock and a hen *Das Lumpengesindel*. This fairy tale is characterized by extreme cruelty of the actors (killing just for fun), and only in their third edition, the Brothers Grimm added a sentence to the end, that Mr. Korbes must have been a wicked man (perhaps in order to justify somehow a murder without reason). In fact, in this place one can recall the late medieval work - joyful and immoral (and at the same time quite ruthless) stories about Till Ulenspiegel (*Ein kurzweilig lesen von Till Ulenspiegel, geboren aus dem land zu Braunschweig*): Ulenspiegel looks like a real carnival figure, but his cruel laughter also has a bright side – every story has an advise for its readers. It is interesting to note, that Benjamin sees a similarity between Disney films and old fairy tales. He writes,

what is revealed in recent Disney films was latent in some of the earlier ones: the cosy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of

[18] W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Transl. by John Osborne. London-New York: Verso, 2003, p. 125–26.

[19] I. Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholia. Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language*. Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 77.

existence. This renews an old tradition which is far from reassuring – the tradition inaugurated by the dancing hooligans to be found in depictions of medieval pogroms, of whom the “riff-raff” in the Brothers Grimm fairy tale of that title are a pale, indistinct rear-guard²⁰.

As we will see later, cinematic technology creates technical possibilities to overcome former social tensions, and that is quite similar idea of Bakhtin’s thinking, except the medium on which is based this overcoming. Nevertheless, the fairy tales, despite their ambivalence and their specific being between cruelty and laughter, are important part of human experience. We should look more closely at the theme of experience and its exploration in Benjamin’s thinking.

3. Experience in Modernity

For both, Bakhtin and Benjamin, modernity is the world of such human experience that is marked by fragmentedness and division. In face of such situation, Bakhtin and Benjamin have an intention to overcome divisions in order to bring back the experience of the whole. Not only does Bakhtin emphasize the nature of an unfinished dialogue in his works, his goal is to achieve an overwhelming and total perspective. Such common being and experience is possible to achieve in carnival, or in carnivalized literature (grotesque realism). However, if we look at this subject in Benjamin’s works, we will see that, according to the philosopher and literature critic, literature is unable to create a mass reader. Phenomenologically speaking, reading is always a personal action. Benjamin in the third version of the essay *The Art Work in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility*, emphasises that before the era of technical reproducibility, only epic and architecture were able to create a mass-perception²¹. But in the 20th century, the camera opened the door to create a mass - spectator. He writes,

thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception. The ancient truth expressed by Heraclitus, that those who are awake have a world in common while each sleeper has a world of his own, has been invalidated by film – and less by

[20] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings. Vol.3, 1935-1938. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2002, p. 130.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 264.

depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse²².

Collective laughter with his lining nature of cruelty and human tragedy now is available, but it creates a number of complications in modernity. The process of modernisation was dialectical, as Benjamin writes, that “[w]ith this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind”²³. If Bakhtin in re-animation of literature genres (grotesque realism) sees merit of hidden carnivality, whereas Benjamin prizes technical innovation – the birth of *animation* in the 20th century.

4. Bare life as Modern life

Is it possible to understand the carnival mood and new poverty as synonyms of a certain *bare life*? As it was mentioned above, Bakhtin called carnival as a second life²⁴. In turn, Benjamin in essay *Fate and Character* introduces the term *das bloße Leben*, “bare life”, and employs it again in *Critique of Violence*²⁵. As usual, Benjamin does not offer further directions for how it is to be understood, but it seems that “bare life” is not an initial state so much as what becomes visible through a stripping away of predicates and attributes. In Benjamin’s thinking, modernity appears as a kind of “bare life”.

Benjamin in his unfinished work *The Arcades Project* noted that the distraction is a sign of modernity, and it can be understood as a disappearance of old habits (for instance, a phenomenon of *flâneur*). According to Tim Beasley-Murray, Benjamin is a thinker of modernity and that is the reason why an experience as such and its form is the most important subject for the philosopher. Modernity is a rapidly changing world with its distracted character gradually eliminating old forms of experience²⁶.

In the brilliant analysis a contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben had showed that in modernity the status of *homo sacer* is prescribed not

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[23] W. Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Vol.2, part 2, 1931-1934. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 732.

[24] M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1984, p. 33.

[25] W. Benjamin, *Critique of Violence*. In *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913-1926. Ed. by Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 236-252.

[26] T. Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin. Experience and Form*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 7.

only to a sovereign who declares a state of emergency, but also to scapegoat (for instance, to the Jews during the Holocaust)²⁷. Agamben traces a state of emergency in modernity from the phenomena of bare life, but it is a variation of Benjamin's thought (VIII thesis from *On the concept of history*): "[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "the state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule"²⁸. *Homo sacer* in modernity is the one who lost all his characteristics, so *mutatis mutandis* a poverty of modernity for Benjamin is a bare life (*das bloße Leben*). Putting it into other words, there is no experience – only *das bloße Leben*.

As Benjamin writes,

poverty of experience. This should not be understood to mean that people are yearning for new experience. No, they long for free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty – their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty – that it will lead to something respectable. Nor are they ignorant or inexperienced²⁹.

But what a paradox: the representative of modern bare life is not of human life but a life of animation mouse – Mickey Mouse, or even one can say that a person of modernity is Chaplin's character in films. Both of these actors are fake - fictitious, which means that they lack on of the basic qualities - life. They are huge contrast to alive Medieval carnival figures – clown or joker, which was emphasised by Bakhtin in his work on Rabelais.

Chaplin's appearance is an obvious reference to a bare life, to an absolute poverty:

his clothes are impermeable to very blow of fate. He looks like a man who hasn't taken his clothes off for a month. He is unfamiliar with beds; when he lies down, he does so in a wheelbarrow or on a seesaw³⁰.

No doubt, Chaplin, Mickey Mouse, the Brothers Grimm and even the clown and the joker are comical figures too, so let us turn our attention to laughter theory in Benjamin's thinking. As it was written above, Benjamin mentioned the differences between comic and *Trauerspiel* in his habilitation work. Benja-

[27] G. Agamben, *G. Homo sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, 1998.

[28] W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*. In *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, 1938- 1940. Ed. By Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003, p. 392.

[29] W. Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Vol.2, part 2, 1931-1934. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 734.

[30] W. Benjamin, *Chaplin*. In *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2, part 1, 1927-1930. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 199.

min's theory of laughter reappears later in his work, particularly in his analysis of Brecht's epic theatre, and in the essay *The Author as Producer* (1934), he writes:

there is no better trigger for thinking than laughter. In particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul. Epic theatre is lavish only in occasions for laughter³¹.

In his chapter on the history of laughter, Bakhtin advances the notion of its therapeutic and liberating force, arguing that “laughing truth... degraded power”³². Benjamin also writes about the revolutionary power of laughter in short essay *Chaplin in Retrospect*: “In his films, Chaplin appeals both to the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter”³³. Laughter and sobriety exists in dialectical interdependence, like joke and cruelty: “After a showing of *The Circus*. Chaplin never allows the audience to smile while watching him. They must either double up laughing or be very sad”³⁴. Modern technical innovation – cinematograph – plays a role of a healer from all kind psychosis. Perhaps here lies an importance of technology and according to Benjamin,

technologization [Technisierung] has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychosis. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such pre-emptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. (...) American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies. Their forerunner was the figure of the eccentric. He was the first to inhabit the new fields of action opened up by film – the first occupant of the new built house. This is the context in which Chaplin takes on historical significance³⁵.

Continuing the question of experience and poverty, let us take a look into the features of this phenomenon.

[31] W. Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*. In *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2, part 2, 1931-1934. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 779.

[32] M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1984, p. 93.

[33] W. Benjamin, *Chaplin in Retrospect*. In *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2, part 1, 1927-1930. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 224.

[34] W. Benjamin, *Chaplin*. In *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2, part 1, 1927-1930. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 199.

[35] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings. Vol.3, 1935-1938. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2002, p. 118.

In essay *Experience and Poverty* Benjamin analyzes lessons in experience and for him an indicator of having an experience is the use of proverbs in daily speech.

Moreover, everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at fireside. – Where has it all gone?³⁶.

Proverbs always express a collective experience and incommunicability indicates a tiredness of a modern person: he/she is tired and sleeps, dreaming an existence of Mickey Mouse.

The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man. His life is full miracles – miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun for them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and persecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from tress, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged³⁷.

From this point of view, the very interesting passage is *The Newspaper*, where Benjamin writes about a reader's impatience which is the main organizing form of a newspaper³⁸. Alongside, in the era of capitalism, new forms of communication are emerging, and this new form of communication is information³⁹. The newspaper can no longer contain a traditional narrative, and the inability to tell the stories is a sign of a modern bare life. Benjamin in the essay *The Storyteller* (1936) writes about a collapse of traditional narrative forms⁴⁰. He claims that a storyteller is a rare phenomenon today⁴¹. One reason for this situation is obvious – experience has fallen in value, and the First World War was noticeable sign of it. As Ben-

[36] W. Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Vol.2, part 2, 1931-1934. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 731.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 734-735.

[38] W. Benjamin, *The Newspaper*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Vol.2, part 2, 1931-1934. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 741.

[39] W. Benjamin, *The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings. Vol.3, 1935-1938. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2002, p. 147.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 143-166.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

jamin writes, “[w]asn’t it noticeable at the end of the war that man who returned from the battlefield had grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience?”⁴². Nevertheless, for Benjamin, Russian writer Nikolai Leskov (1831– 1895) is the storyteller of an old kind.

But where lies a value of a storyteller? An essential feature of every real story is that it contains, openly or covertly, something useful: “In one case, the usefulness may lie in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers”⁴³. The same value is prescribed to the fairy tale as well. As Benjamin writes,

the fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where there was greatest, its aid was nearest. This need was the need created by myth. (...) The wisest thing - so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day - is to meet the mythical world with cunning and with high spirit⁴⁴.

It is quite interesting that Benjamin emphasises that the beginning of this phenomenon is not in secular modernity – it was started much more earlier⁴⁵. Actually, here again we can see a poverty, which was brought by technical innovation – the printing technology. Benjamin writes,

the earliest indication of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is different in kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What distinguishes the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor enters into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has secluded himself. The birthplace of the novel is the indivi-

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 143-144.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. P.145.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 145-146 .

dual in his isolation, the individual who can no longer speak of his concerns in exemplary fashion, who himself lacks counsel and can give none⁴⁶.

In sum, Benjamin argues that a novel cannot create a collective experience, as it was declared by Bakhtin. Grotesque realism, carnivalization of literature changes nothing – a reading act is always personal act, and a form of novel is created for isolated individual⁴⁷. A modern writer cannot give any advise to his reader, as it was in former times. Nevertheless, modern person wants to have common experience, but what he gets is a quasi knowledge, poor ideas, such as “the revival of astrology and wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism”⁴⁸ and that shows the poverty of experience and thinking.

So, it seems that for Benjamin modern person is rich of quasi-spiritual wisdom, his speech is not proverbial, and his representation is a comic figure of Charlie Chaplin, which is accompanied by animated Mickey Mouse. It is a mistery, writes Benjamin, why this little hero (Mickey Mouse) who hasn't any resemblance to humans life suddenly became so popular. But what is more interesting in this Benjamin's remark is that

all Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is. So the explanation for the huge popularity of these films is not mechanization, their form; nor is it a misunderstanding. It is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them⁴⁹.

Looking for fear means looking for experience, and this refers to a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm – *The Boy Who Left Home in Order to Learn the Meaning of Fear* – which also served as a principal theme in Wagner's version of the Siegfried legend⁵⁰. It would seem that in this desperate situation, as it is typical for Benjamin, he also finds a way out: the preparation of human civilization to survive in the “state of emergency”. Further Benjamin writes,

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

[47] *Ibidem.*

[48] W. Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Vol.2, part 2, 1931-1934. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 732.

[49] W. Benjamin, *Mickey Mouse*. In *Selected Writings*. Vol 2, part, 2, 1931-1934. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p 545.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 546.

in these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization. Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind. These films disavow experience more radically than ever before. In such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences. Similarity to fairy tales. Not since fairy tales have the most important and most vital events been evoked more unsymbolically and more unatmospherically⁵¹.

At this point one can see an obvious reference to the above mentioned Benjamin's analysis of modernity (*The Arcades Project*), where *the gambler* as another figure of modernity appears (alongside with *le flâneur* and with *him, who waits*). Benjamin writes in a little fragment *Experience* that "[t]he character type that learns by experience is the exact opposite of the gambler as a type"⁵². Actually, modern figure is still looking for experience, and has a different relation with time. So, modern person has experience at personal level, but he doesn't have a collective experience. Along the analysis of poverty of experience Benjamin proclaims a new kind of barbarism. The modern person experiences catharsis, and therefore the new barbarism (the absence of any of the qualities listed above) seems like a positive term:

Indeed (let's admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism. Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. Among great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a *tabula rasa*⁵³.

In tragic circumstances of modernity we have become impoverished, human heritage lost its value, and nevertheless, we laugh together with the first cinematic inhabitants of the new world. "This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good. Let's hope that from time to time the individual will give a little humanity to the masses, who one day will repay him with compound interest"⁵⁴.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 545.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 543.

[53] W. Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*. In *Selected Writings*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Vol.2, part 2, 1931-1934. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, p. 732.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 735.