

# Research on the Problems and Countermeasures of Comedy Variety Shows from the Perspective of Carnival Theory

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**Abstract**—Comedy variety shows have a long history, continuing from the 5th century BCE to the present day, and are important part of literature and art. In modern society, comedy, characterized by its humorous and lighthearted nature, has emerged as an effective means of alleviating stress and fostering emotional resonance. Since 2014, comedy variety shows in China have entered a new phase of vigorous development, marked by innovative formats and widespread popularity. This study employs Carnival Theory to explore the carnival attributes embedded within comedy variety shows. By analyzing *The Annual Comedy Competition* as a case study, the paper deciphers the carnival logic underpinning these programs and reveals their mechanisms for constructing a “carnival world” alongside its sociocultural significance. The article also evaluates the problems of comedy variety shows and proposes strategies to build a benign comedy creation ecology. The article is divided into four parts: the first part defines the conceptual framework of Carnival Theory; the second part analyses the carnival characteristics of Comedy Variety Shows; the third part discusses developmental dilemmas, including pan-entertainment trends and cultural homogenization; the fourth part proposes countermeasures, including talent cultivation and content orientation; and finally, the study concludes the significance of comedy variety shows, emphasizing that high-quality productions must integrate entertainment with substantive values to achieve artistic depth and social relevance.

**Keywords**—Carnival Theory; Comedy Variety Shows.

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a pivotal medium of popular culture, comedy variety shows have emerged as a dual force of entertainment and emotional bonding in contemporary society, characterized by their humor and participatory nature. Since 2014, Chinese comedy variety shows, exemplified by *Rock & Roast* and *The Annual Comedy Competition*, have experienced exponential growth, catering to the public's demand for stress relief while serving as a communal space for social catharsis. However, driven by the “attention economy”, many programs increasingly exhibit symptoms of “pan-entertainment addiction,” marked by superficial content, homogenized formats, and even latent cultural violence. Striking a balance between entertainment appeal and substantive value has thus become a critical challenge for both academic inquiry and industry practice.

Bakhtin's Carnival Theory offers a compelling lens to decode the cultural dynamics of comedy variety shows. The

subversive, egalitarian, and ritualistic aspects that are ingrained in these initiatives are highlighted by the triadic notions of “carnival,” “carnavalesque,” and “carnivalization.”. Within the “second world” constructed by comedy shows, audiences temporarily transcend societal hierarchies through laughter and satire, engaging in collective liberation. Yet, unchecked carnivalesque excess risks devolving into cultural anarchy, as seen in the normalization of vulgarity and ideological manipulation. Existing scholarship predominantly applies Carnival Theory to universal cultural phenomena, while systematic analyses of its localized manifestations in Chinese comedy programming—particularly its risks and regulatory potential—remain underexplored.

## II. CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION AND APPLICATION OF CARNIVAL THEORY

In the 1960s, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin first proposed the concept of Carnival Theory in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin argued that “during the carnival, people temporarily and symbolically realize their dreams of changing their status and destiny, of possessing wealth, power and freedom, by crowning, uncrowning, making up and putting on masks.”<sup>[1]</sup> The Bakhtinian carnival places emphasis on a core principle of equal and free dialogue involving all individuals. This form of carnival is universal in nature, as it is characterized by the absence of a designated audience and the participation of all individuals. The main topics covered by carnival theory include the history and development of carnival, the essence and attributes of carnival, the players in carnival, the square aspect of carnival, and the language of carnival. The spirit of carnival advocated by Bakhtin is in essence the subversion of hierarchy, equality of dialogue status and openness. On the one hand, the theory provides a novel perspective and robust support for the study of cultural phenomena in China, thereby further enriching and enhancing the development of cultural theory in China. On the other hand, its reasonable application and reflection can offer a novel theoretical concern and idea for the evolution of Chinese comedy variety.

Bakhtin's carnival theory encompasses three closely related concepts: “Carnival”, “Carnavalesque” and “Carnivalization”:

### (1) Carnival

Carnival was originally a kind of folklore activity held to worship the god of agriculture, on this day, people put down the work at hand, speak freely, and revel to their heart's content. In the Middle Ages, all the activities of carnival for the purpose of sacrifice embodied the theory of carnival. The universality of carnival, which means that anyone can participate in it, was something Goethe observed during the Romantic era. Carnival is narrowly defined as a specific festival day, in which people can have fun, get rid of the usual hierarchical concepts of superiority and inferiority, and interact with each other in an equal and intimate way. Although the form of Carnival entertainment is complicated, but it is an indispensable part of Carnival, and with the development of the times and national changes and changes. The most important characteristic of the carnival was the "free and easy life of the square" in opposition to the regular life of the church, which was subject to a strict and rigid hierarchical order, and was thus a "second life".<sup>[2]</sup>

### (2) Carnavalesque

The totality form of Carnival entertainment is also termed the carnivalesque. Defined as the synthesis of all celebratory rituals, ceremonies, and performative practices intrinsic to carnival, the carnivalesque constitutes a hybridized and ritualized entertainment form. [1] Its formal fluidity liberates carnival from fixed temporal and spatial constraints. The carnivalesque has gradually extended outside of its initial confines over time, becoming a widespread cultural trend through historical sedimentation that has permeated everyday life. According to Bakhtin's theoretical framework, the carnivalesque can be categorized into four dimensions: The first is that people can touch each other intimately and casually in the carnival; the second is the way of coexistence of gags; the third is the attitude of people's equal intimacy in life, which is reflected in many things; and the fourth is coarseness, which is a kind of mockery of the sacred, while at the same time maintains a commoner's style of life.

### (3) Carnivalization

The transformation of the carnivalesque into the language of literature is carnivalization, which is a fundamental concept in Bakhtin's theory of carnival, where an entire vocabulary of real sensory forms is created to represent symbolic meanings. Bakhtin argues that "Carnival has developed an exclusive system of language that is sensual and symbolic." This language does not always take the form of words, but may also be staged. It is not possible to put this visual language into precise words, but it can be translated into figurative artistic language that is similar to its meaning. That is to say "the carnivalesque turns into the language of literature, which is what we call carnivalization."

## III. CARNAVALESQUE REPRESENTATIONS IN CHINESE COMEDY VARIETY SHOWS

The advent of mass media has facilitated the spirit of carnival in a more authentic manner, while the emergence of new media has engendered a dual-direction interactive platform for mass carnival. On this platform, everyone can become a participant in the carnival square at any time. As part of the mass media, comedy variety shows have created a

carnival extravaganza for the masses, depicting carnival colors and showing the carnival spirit from three aspects: universality, ritualization and subversion.

### (1) The Universality of Carnavalesque in Chinese Comedy Variety Shows

The Carnival Theory is deeply rooted in the laughter and anger in the field of folk culture, and the carnival has always been a grand festival shared by all the people. Therefore, the carnivalesque universality lies in the ubiquitous and universal carnival atmosphere it creates. In such a festival, everyone has the qualification and right to participate in the carnival. Even after the carnival comes to an end, the spirit of equality, freedom and banter can still influence people's real life and become an important guide in their pursuit of freedom.

Comedy variety shows, which take the entertainment of the public as its leading function, have a deep mark of universality. The tone of comedy variety shows is joyful, light and lively, and with the support of the Internet, it has become a carnival scene for all people to participate in at any time, and the laughter of the carnival can help people get rid of the pressure of life, eliminate the fear of the unknown, and build up an optimistic attitude towards life. In the carnival square created by comedy variety shows, people can temporarily forget their worries, release pressure and enjoy the atmosphere of joy and freedom.

### (2) The Ritualization of Carnavalesque in Chinese Comedy Variety Shows

Bakhtin calls the sum of all the rituals, celebrations, and forms in the carnival as the Carnavalesque, therefore, the carnival is full of rituals. This sense of ritual is manifested in four main categories, "casual and intimate contact, carnivalesque stooping to relationships, coarseness, and so on." It is through these categories that people are able to unleash their personal emotions in the carnival without fear, completely ignoring the constraints of social status and power. In comedy variety shows, the programme team consciously builds a common meaning space by setting up symbols to achieve meaning sharing. The uniqueness of ritual symbols in comedy programmes gives a special meaning, and also allows viewers to understand the content of the programme more deeply through these ritual symbols, thus deepening their impression of the programme and forming a more viscous circle of viewers.

### (3) The Subversion of Carnavalesque in Chinese Comedy Variety Shows

Subversion is a particularly prominent feature of Bakhtin's theory of carnival. This kind of subversion is not simply the overthrow or destruction of traditional concepts, but a kind of profound reflection and reconstruction. People can feel unlimited freedom and laugh at ease in the carnival atmosphere, in which "people abandon their original image and temporarily change their image in a way that is different from the norm, thus creating the illusion of subversion." In the midst of the carnival spectacle, a "second world" is revealed, which is very different from everyday life. This world seems to be an inverted mirror image, disturbing the original parallel order and turning reality upside down. The authority of order,

which is regarded as sacrosanct in daily life, is subverted in the carnival. This subversive spirit of resistance is an important part of the profound connotation of carnival theory. In the development of Chinese comedy variety shows, “subversion” has occurred from time to time, which has become an excellent means for comedy variety shows to break homogeneity and create differentiation. At the same time, due to the more relaxed environment of the Internet, comedy variety shows have been able to create a larger creative space, and more deviant and unusual comedy variety shows creation modes have appeared, making comedy variety shows more subversive.

#### IV. THE PROBLEM OF OUT-OF-CONTROL CARNIVAL IN CHINESE COMEDY VARIETY SHOWS

The “carnival world” described by Bakhtin in his theories is a reflection of the subversive and rebellious spirit, and comedy variety shows are full of humanistic ideas. With the development of network technology and the influx of all kinds of information, how to occupy the attention has become the primary issue, so in the context of market saturation, exaggerated, ugly and other behaviors have become the main form of obtaining the “attention economy”. If variety shows are not guided correctly, they will only bring shallow carnival, and after a short period of excitement, there will only be devastation, and they will not be able to influence and guide people's social life for a long time, thus going to the extreme of “entertainment to death”.

##### (1) Pan-Entertainment Addiction under the comedy variety show carnival

From carnivals, rituals and games in the past to shopping festivals, variety shows and music festivals nowadays, there are various kinds of entertainment, which can briefly free people from boring work, but the easy availability of entertainment also leads to excessive entertainment, which requires our high vigilance.

First, the value bias of “entertainment to death”. Under the strong influence of new media, all kinds of things gradually tend to be entertained, and human beings seem to be willing to be wrapped up in the wave of entertainment, so that they gradually evolve into a species that is almost “entertainment to death”. Comedy should be the core spirit of freedom, but the form of being funny for the sake of being funny will make the comedy shows become empty and boring. For example, in the skit *My Senior*, every punchline aroused a good response, but the final voting result was in the last place because of the lack of kernel and story integrity. People can laugh along with the nonsensical plot, but when the show comes to an end, they can tell which comedies have vitality and which are empty.

Second, fragmented communication dissolves in-depth thinking. The virtual nature of the internet has become the best platform for the public to express their true feelings, which releases emotions, but how to keep a clear head and rational judgement in the midst of the carnival depends largely on people themselves. The fragmented content of comedy variety shows is easy to be disseminated briefly, and even short video platforms will directly edit part of the programme for

dissemination, but this form often lacks a complete and coherent logic. In this process, the original meaning of the text is dissolved, logical confusion, lack of rational thinking is the norm, short and concise comedy content is spread quickly by people in the process of interaction, thus affecting people's desire to think about rational content.

##### (2) Violence under the comedy variety show carnival

First, language carnival violence. Carnival language has vulgarity, and many carousers use this language feature to rebel against authority, in the process, vulgar language often becomes a powerful tool for them to express their dissatisfaction and challenge authority. “Violent messages in the media can become habituated to children, and the effects of violence are carried into adolescence and adulthood and affect their values.” The heat of comedy variety shows has led to a wider dissemination of some of the underlying violence and factors, and in the online environment of bingeing, the problem of online violence has become particularly prominent and cannot be ignored.

Second, content carnival violence. According to Bakhtin, people are raving in the “second world”. The “second world” is a completely “upside down world”, where people invert and desecrate all the things considered sacred and the routine logic of everyday life. The logic of everyday life is inverted, desecrated and ridiculed, revealing a subversive way of life. But there are boundaries to the carnival, and the content violence in comedy variety often transcends the boundaries of the work and has a long-lasting impact on life. Comedy works often have obvious subjective tendencies and personal colors, and are inevitably biased, and may even escalate into violent conflicts at the content level, which may sometimes cause offence and discomfort to the original audience of the culture due to the one-sided understanding of the creators.

##### (3) Cultural Hypnosis under the comedy-variety carnival

From Bakhtin's perspective, carnival culture not only subverts the inherent order of power and status in society, but also breaks down many antagonistic concepts. Comedy variety shows deconstruct rational concepts and mainstream consciousness by means of alienation, parody and simulation, which, if not corrected, will inevitably lead to the formation of extremist consciousness, which may in turn pose a potential threat to social stability.

First, ideological hypnosis. Althusser once pointed out that the influence of ideology on people is often subtle, and it is difficult for people to intuitively perceive its existence and effect. In order to pursue the so-called “high traffic”, some media may misinterpret certain contents of the programme, which leads to the bias of the information received by the audience, thus making the original healthy comedy variety shows lose its original positive meaning in some aspects.

Second, traditional cultural hypnosis. In many comedy variety shows, there are parodies of historical figures, and characters and historical events are reimagined, which can have an inappropriate impact on the first-time cultural receivers. As a result, many people are unknowingly influenced by cultural hypnosis, and this passive acceptance quietly changes people's worldview and values, which may



lead to the loss of their ability to think independently, and thus pose a threat to social stability and cultural diversity. When such influence gradually permeates all corners of society, it can lead to a cultural crisis, posing a threat to social stability and development.

#### V. COUNTERMEASURES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE COMEDY VARIETY SHOWS UNDER THE PERSPECTIVE OF CARNIVAL THEORY

Chinese comedy variety shows, though not as long-standing as other genres, have seen a steady increase in quantity and diversity. To break the homogenization of comedy variety shows, creators have started adopting a “comedy+” format to open up the market, while also leveraging trending topics to boost their popularity. However, comedy variety shows still face complex challenges. If we want these shows to develop sustainably, we must remain highly vigilant against the excessive pursuit of audience supremacy in the realm of entertainment.

(1) Adjust the talent training strategy to prevent the problem of out-of-control carnival

First, improve the professionalism of comedy creators. In the era of self-media, talents from all walks of life have entered the comedy variety shows industry, absorbing many comedic talents while also causing the phenomenon of uneven comedy levels, so it is necessary to improve the professionalism of comedy creators in order to effectively avoid the appearance of improper output of values and other situations. Comedy variety shows can take this opportunity to establish a perfect training system, by allowing comedy creators to learn comedy theory, performance skills training and social insight training, so that comedy variety shows not only can provide a learning platform for comedy fans, comedy fans will also be through the continuous growth and learning for comedy variety shows feedback talent, thus forming a virtuous cycle development mode.

Second, improve the training mechanism of comedy talents. One of the reasons for the homogenization of comedy variety shows is the repetition of guest invitations. Most comedy variety shows frequently invite guests like Jia Ling from Big Bowl Entertainment, Yue Yunpeng from Deyun Society (a traditional cross-talk collective), and Shen Teng from Happy Mahua Comedy Team. If this continues, it will inevitably lead to audience fatigue. Therefore, it is particularly important for the solicitation of comedic talents to be incubated.

(2) Focus on the value orientation of the content to guard against the tendency of out-of-control carnival

The virtual environment created by comedy variety shows can influence the audience's perception of reality in a subtle way. Therefore, while entertaining the public, comedy variety shows should also consider their social responsibility, actively play a positive role in guiding the audience and enhancing their taste.

First, avoid excessive entertainment and focus on deep expression. Overly entertaining content often packages events with exaggerated effects to meet the public's demand for entertainment, which can easily overlook the function of

cultural education. Such a creative tendency not only leads to the superficiality of cultural products but also results in shallow comedy shows. Comedy variety shows should start from small things and actively observe life for better content creation. In the programme, although the propositions set up in the Annual Comedy Competition are macro, such as love, work, affection, etc., in the process of creation, the creative team unanimously used the technique of seeing the big in the small, starting from the small things to express the grand themes, and then formed the content with depth of expression after fine-tuning.

Second, focus on original works to enhance aesthetic appreciation. Catering to diverse tastes is a major challenge for comedy, but at its core, comedy remains a universal human emotion, with content creation being fundamental. On the stage of *Annual Comedy Competition*, the core expression is always about the emotional connections between people, such as Wu Liuqi's *The Gardener*, which conveys the bond between father and daughter. Audiences feel a unique sense of family behind his exaggerated yet childlike objects.

Third, use internet-savvy expression and focus on emotional connection. “Internet-savvy” refers to the style of film and television works that reflect the nature of online culture, featuring fragmented and sensory content, with strong user participation and experiential elements. It is a concentrated manifestation of online aesthetic culture and popular trends. In comedy variety shows, internet-savvy expression needs to be conveyed through diverse internet language, innovative comedic narrative systems, quick and concise comedic styles, as well as a down-to-earth narrative perspective.

(3) Strong regulation by the government and the media to eliminate the violence of out-of-control carnival

In the face of the current free and open cultural industry and diversified ideological discourses, it is necessary for comedy variety shows to respond positively to the call of the state, carry out multiple regulation from the height of socialist ideology construction and modern governance, and promote the healthy, rational, and orderly development of audiovisual arts and cultural works under the guidance of values, so as to provide powerful positive energy for the adherence to and development of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, and to open up a brand-new situation for the cause of the Party and the country.

On the one hand, government supervision should be strengthened and relevant laws and regulations should be improved. The establishment of laws and regulations is not a restriction of freedom, but a promotion and protection of freedom, so that people can better pursue freedom and enjoy the beauty of life. At this stage, there is no real media regulation in China, so it is very important for government departments to regulate and control media content. While regulating, it is important to adhere to the socialist concept of communication with Chinese characteristics and take the requirements of the mass line as the guideline. The government departments need to do the checking at all levels, improve the effectiveness of the relevant laws and regulations,

and create a favourable environment for the further improvement of China's arts and culture industry.

On the other hand, they should pay attention to the role of market regulation and create positively influential content. The speed of updating laws and regulations is still difficult to fully adapt to the current complex and changing online environment. In the face of this challenge, not only do the government and programme producers need to increase their supervision and intervention, but they also need to pay more attention to the public's expression of opinions during the broadcasting process. To a large extent, the audience represents the voice of the market. Using the same voting format as the viewers, it is still the market that reflects the quality of the work and decides whether the contestants will stay or go. Therefore, through the feedback from the audience at the recording site and the online platform, we can understand the voice of the market and find out what the market really wants to see, thus motivating the comedy creators to create more quality content.

The carnival, with the development of technology, has continuously evolved in form, but its core remains unchanged

throughout history. It showcases the dialogue between the periphery and the center, the ever-evolving spirit of freedom, and the rebelliousness that embodies dual negation. All these elements are vividly displayed in comedy variety shows. On the surface, these shows attract audiences by creating a “second world”, where everyone freely expresses their emotions and has the right to overturn anything they disagree with at any time. However, at its core, comedy variety shows delve into social events or topics, directly impacting every viewer's life. Through deconstruction and reconstruction, they expose ugliness, criticize injustice, and satirize alienation. After shattering everything, they reassemble it using universal human emotions to soothe the masses' hearts.

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