Ritual in Prague’s Velvet Carnival

Ronald L. Grimes

Driven by war, interreligious conflict, interethnic hostility, ecological crisis, economic change, rapid globalization, and technological modernization, people are on the move, crossing national and cultural boundaries. Migrating people carry ideas, values, memories, traditions, and practices. Among the most important practices are festivals, performances that display and celebrate who people are. Festivals are multisensory events organized to perform, display, and celebrate religious or cultural values. Such celebrations are often laden with a heavy set of public expectations. They should be occasions of collective joy but also demonstrate conformity or resistance. While some traditional religious festivals are disappearing, others thrive by undergoing radical transformation as they are adapted to new, sometimes quite different social settings. In addition to these imported, exported, and adapted festivals, new ones are being invented or reinvented.
Situated in public arenas, festivals are often the medium by which cultural, social, and religious identities are negotiated and reflected upon.

Several genres of performance are nested in festivals. When devotees or demonstrators take to the streets behaving decorously and moving in an orderly manner, they are probably parading or processing. If the group is demonstrative, exhibitionistic, and celebrative, the event is more likely a *parade*. If participants are less demonstrative, more solemn or dignified, one might call this a *procession*. If the rhythms and demeanor are militaristic, we might tag the activity a *march*, although walking *demonstrations* such as Gandhi’s Salt March (1930), the March on Washington (1963), the Million Man March (1995), and the Women’s March (2017) are also called marches even though they are usually walked rather than marched. The ethos of these events—militant rather than militaristic—makes them also akin to *walks* and *runs* for various causes. If participants take to the roads or trails headed for a sacred or transformative place, and then return home, we would label this a *pilgrimage*.

Like all categories, these mix and overlap, and they do not form a consistent typology. Classificatory grids are rough approximations that oversimplify events on the ground and in ordinary public usage, forcing scholars to invent other categories. Using such a terminological division of labor, one might think that processions happened only outdoors, but there are wedding and funeral processions. Are soldiers in a military funeral marching or processing? If the decorum shatters at a demonstration and rocks are thrown through store windows followed by the firing of bullets, what shall we call this, a chaotic mob or a planned political action?

My research on rituals, processions, pilgrimages, and parades emerged out of the study of festivals. From 1972 until now I have studied the Santa Fe Fiesta, then more recently, Prague’s Velvet Carnival. Unlike the Fiesta, which began in 1712 as a Spanish commemoration of the reconquest, the Velvet Carnival of Prague is of recent vintage, having started in 2012. Organizers call it “Sametové posvícení” in Czech and “Velvet Carnival” in English. However, English speakers tend to associate “carnival” with either the traveling sideshows that sometimes accompany circuses or with the masked street partying that precedes the fasting of Lent, such as it does in New Orleans Mardi Gras, or Carnival in Trinidad, Rio, and Venice. Neither connotation of “carnival” quite describes the Prague event. Velvet “parade” or “festival” is a bit more accurate since the event is not pre-Lenten. However, “procession” is even more accurate.

The Contemporary Context of European Festivity

Festivals are blooming and thriving around the world. The Velvet Carnival emerged during a time of renewed European interest in festivals. The University of Limerick started a Master of Festive Arts program in 2013. Prior to that the European Commission in 2011 declared that festivals are central to public culture, because they are “spaces and times of concentrated debate and social effervescence” (European Commission 2011). Shortly after making this declaration, the European Union demonstrated its commitment to festivity by establishing a new budget line and issuing a call for proposals to initiate the “European Platform for Festivals,” citing as its reason the potential that festivals have for generating “innovation, social inclusion,
education and intercultural dialogue” (European Commission 2014). The focus of the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes Program on itineraries articulates the belief that pilgrimages are cultural routes capable of providing Europeans with a sense of unity and a common heritage (Council of Europe 2016). As focal points on such pilgrimage routes, says the Council, festivals are set in special places; they in turn produce special spaces. These places become the geographical grounds on which intercultural and interreligious negotiations can take place.

This elevated view of festivity is driven by scholarship as well as economics. The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) proposes that medieval festivity began disappearing from the streets in the 17th century, only to reappear in literature as “the carnivalesque” (Bakhtin [1965] 1968).

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983) observed liminality, antistructure, and communitas in African rites of passage only to rediscover these processes, now tagged “the liminoid” in European and North American rock concerts, pilgrimages, theatre workshops, and festivals (Turner 1969).

Reflecting on pilgrimages and festivals, Europeans like to invoke the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor who, in A Secular Age, claims that festivity is experiencing a renaissance. In fact, Taylor identifies its emergence in European public cultures as one of “the new forms of religion in our world” (2007:482–83). Elevated talk about festivity is now heard around the globe, and many academic disciplines are gathering for the feast. Among them are anthropology, folklore, ethnomusicology, ritual studies, performance studies, tourism studies, business and management, and event studies.

Whether social integration so obviously arises from festivity, whether apparently secular festivals really function as new religions, whether liminality so readily translates from rites of passage to arts festivals, and whether the carnivalesque in literature is a functional equivalent of festivity in the streets—all should be treated as research questions rather than assumed as obvious truths. Scholars may even have to consider the more crass possibility that festivals are flashy fishing lures aimed at reeling in tourists and convincing the locals to part with their hard-earned money.

Starting with either an elevated or a debased view does not advance research very far. More effective would be the production of rich case studies and the formulation of incisive questions growing out of them. Some of these might be basic questions, but we scholars should not assume that we have answers: What is a festival? How do festivals work? How do festivals thrive or fail? How do communities evaluate them? What are the possibilities and dangers of festivals? How do music, masks, theatre, and other performative elements transform festivity? How should we study public events that are multisited, mixed-genre, multimedia, and simultaneously local and global? And even: what questions are worth asking of such events?

Etymologically, a feast was a feast, a Roman religious event. Christians appropriated the same term for their own festivities. Whereas Christians feasted and festivalized prior to a fast, Romans probably did not. The etymology for “carnival” is more complex and debated. Folk etymologies claim that “carnival” means “goodbye to meat,” although the philological evidence does not seem to support this claim.

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1. The Platform gives space only to festivals capable of paying the annual fee of €4,500 plus a sign-up fee of an additional €2,000. As a result, participants are almost exclusively representatives of large music festivals with big budgets. Low-cost projects that might also be sources of “innovation, social inclusion, education and dialogue” are largely excluded.

2. For Taylor the festive consists of “moments of fusion in a common action/feeling, which both wrench us out of the everyday, and seem to put us in touch with something exceptional, beyond ourselves. Which is why some have seen these moments as among the new forms of religion in our world” (2007:482–83).

3. The folk etymology holds that “carnival” is derived from carne (“meat”) and levare (Italian for “to lift or remove”) or salve (Latin for “goodbye”). For the case against this view see Walter (2003).
Contemporary parlance tends to distinguish religious festivals from secular arts festivals. Currently, almost anything can be labeled a festival; the label sells. Festivals no longer have a 

necessary connection with the gods. More definitive are five other qualities: food, display, abundance, upbeat attitudes, and openness to visitors. However we formally define the term, “festivity” is sometimes imagined as a larger basket in which ritual may be nested: the Santa Fe Fiesta (English: festival) contains several masses (rituals, liturgies). But the nesting process may also work the other way around: a ritual may lead to or contain a festival or festive elements. The two may be nested, or the one may give rise to the other: a ritual may eventuate in a festival and vice versa. So rituals and festivals, whether embedded mutually or linked sequentially, are akin but not identical.

Theory and definition questions arise both before and after arriving at a field site or textual repository, but big talk about festivity—whether theoretical or economic and political—needs to be grounded in ethnographic, comparative, and, I would say, videographic research on the full range of festivals from traditional and religious to emerging and secular.4

The Emerging Velvet Carnival

In the Czech Republic, 17 November is a national holiday officially known as “Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day” (fig. 2). Rhetorically and officially, this annual event commemorates the Velvet Revolution of 1989, but much else surfaces on that day. The video “Ritualizing the Czech Velvet Revolution” samples that day’s activities in 2012, the Velvet Carnival’s first year (Grimes 2012c), and it tracks the shift from the militant morning to the ludic afternoon. Surprisingly, the video opens with “Ghost Riders in the Sky,” an American country-and-western tune5 that echoed across Wenceslas Square as people began gathering on the morning of 17 November for a massive demonstration. The mood was militant, with labor unions calling for the downfall of the current government. The square was sonically crosscut by competing bullhorns and loudspeakers in elevated places, and later by sirens and whistles as a counter-demonstration erupted. Riot police were called and arrests made.

In the afternoon of this same day, the first Velvet Carnival happened. It originated with Olga Cieslarová (fig. 3), a graduate student of religious studies and theatre at Charles University, Prague. She had studied Fasnacht, a masked celebration in Basel, Switzerland. Then she returned to Prague to create with Martin Pehal and others a similar festival in Prague.6

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5. Written by Stan Jones and first published in 1948.

6. Their mentor is Dr. Radek Chlup of the Institute of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Charles University.
One way to experience the sonic and rhythmic pace of the procession is to watch *Velvet Carnival 2013: A Spectator’s View* (Grimes 2013b). This video takes the point of view of a static spectator watching the procession go by. This particular street is bordered by buildings on one side and the Vltava River on the other, so the music and sounds bounce away toward the river, seeming lost if one is not standing on the curb close to the procession. There were sizeable gaps between groups, leading interviewed participants to complain that they had no sense, either sonic or visual, of the whole procession. Those in the middle or at the end could barely hear the piccolos and drums played by the marching Swiss musicians at the head of the line.

An alternate way to experience the flow of the procession is by watching *Bridging Prague* (Grimes 2014). This video begins with a mix of music sampled from Charles Bridge during an ordinary, non-festive day, during which two musicians, a European didgeridoo-and-drum player and a devotional singer, are performing. Then the audio shifts at 1:28 to music from the Velvet Carnival procession as it passes. While crossing the bridge, parading groups sometimes butt against each other or spectators, generating considerable cacophony, especially when spectators decide to join the procession by dancing, singing, or beating rhythms on the bridge’s railings. From 2:00 to 3:15 the overlap between participants and spectators is considerable. A street organ, tuba, clicksticks, and drums are playing as children contribute their own festive shrieks. By 3:30 the procession has become a march as a subgroup of Velvet Carnivalers follows the lead of a slam poet’s drum-infused rant.

On the far side of the Charles Bridge, where the canyon-like streets are narrow and enshrouded by buildings, the music echoes, engulfing participants and spectators, even at a distance. From minute 4:00 to the end of the video, an actual band (as distinct from a bunch of noise-makers with instruments) is playing “When the Saints Go Marching In.” Even though most people were not singing, and no interviewed participants were contemplating saintliness, the tune is heard repeatedly in Prague’s Velvet Carnival and Basel’s Fasnacht.

According to the organizers interviewed between 2012 and 2016 only a few rules govern Velvet Carnival groups as they hand out flyers, shout slogans, or sing. Signage and verbalizations by participants should be indirect, that is, satirical or poetic. Direct political critique on signs is prohibited. The Velvet Carnival is both a reaction against the morning demonstrations and a way of playfully espousing local causes. Its tone is ironic and gently, rather than militantly, iconoclastic. The event is designed, say the organizers, to transform anger into celebration and polemics into creativity. Since all ages participate in the Velvet Carnival, North Americans would call it a “family friendly” event.

Participants insist that the Velvet Carnival is not a demonstration. Demonstrations are contentious whereas the Velvet Carnival is celebrative. Velvet Carnival organizers and participants

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7. For instance, while gazing at the Lennon Wall, which the procession would eventually pass, one could hear Velvet Carnival music as it exited the bridge. See also Grimes (2012c).
generally avoid the morning events, partly because they are preparing and partly as a statement. In 2012 and 2013 I could find only one Velvet Carnival participant who had attended both the morning demonstration and the afternoon procession.

In 2012 the demonstration flooded into the streets, surging down National Avenue (Národní Třída) toward the National Theatre, where Velvet Carnival participants were donning masks for the procession. The police could not stop the huge crowd, so carnival participants were forced to leave early by way of a rear entrance to avoid a collision on the streets.8

**History and Festivity**

It is often taken for granted by scholars that festivals and processions enhance, if not actually create, identity, and that they do so by reaching outward to foster community and stretching backward into history to cultivate (if not invent) tradition. Knowing little about Czech history, I asked graduate students in a fieldwork course that I was teaching at Charles University whether the Velvet Carnival had historical roots.9 The students hesitated. Yes, the procession is held on 17 November, loosely connecting the procession with the Velvet Revolution of 1989, but other than that, no, they replied, the allusions of the procession are contemporary rather than historical.

I decided to do some historical research to understand the students’ comments. In 1939 the Nazis had suppressed a demonstration by Charles University students. On 11 November of that year Jan Opletal, a medical student, was shot in the stomach and died a few days later. In protest and solidarity, 4,000 people, largely students, joined his funeral procession. The Nazis retaliated on 17 November by closing all Czech institutions of higher education, executing nine students and professors without trial, and sending 1,200 others to concentration camps. Two years later, in 1941, 17 November was dubbed International Students’ Day in honor of the Czech student resistance. For several decades, the day was honored and celebrated around the world.

In 1968 the Soviet army invaded Czechoslovakia. A year later another student, Jan Palach, set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square to protest the invasion’s “demoralizing effect” (his term) on the Czech people. Near the spot where this second Jan immolated himself is a memorial. Jan’s death mask now hangs to the left of the front entrance of the Faculty of Arts, where today’s students study philosophy and religion (fig. 4).

On 9 November 1989, 50 years after the Nazi suppression of academic freedom in the Czech Republic, the Berlin Wall fell. Eight days later, 17 November, was International Students’ Day. It was also the 50th anniversary of Jan Opletal’s death, so students in Prague

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8. The near-collision is visible in the background of the video *Ritualizing the Czech Velvet Revolution* (Grimes 2012c: 5:09–5:14).

9. The students who conducted the fieldwork were: Lukáš Brychta, Jiří Dynda, Barbora Ficková, Evelyne Koubková, Jan Kozák, Milan Kroulík, Matouš Preiniger, Barbora Sojková, and Markéta Svobodová. Martin Pehal managed the Skype portion of the course.
Ronald L. Grimes

mobilized. Joined by thousands of others, they confronted armed soldiers and tanks, eventually precipitating the expulsion of the occupying Soviet army. In the chaos, so the story goes, students were backed into a corner of an arcade on National Avenue; a few were brutally beaten and badly injured. Today, at that spot there is a memorial sculpture of student hands flashing the “V” for victory sign (fig. 5). The public regards this tiny, cramped space as the place where the 1989 Velvet Revolution began. As regime collapses go, this one was comparatively gentle and the loss of life small, hence the adjective “Velvet.” This little arcade is flooded with candles each 17th of November. Compared with other commemorative spaces, this one is quiet, even though it is on a busy street. People go silent, linger, place flowers or messages, light candles, and watch others carry out acts of civic devotion.

In 2012 the Velvet Carnival paid no attention to the Velvet Revolution, the National Avenue shrine, or the Palach memorial. In 2013, after the Velvet Carnival procession had ended, a few participants deposited masks alongside the candle debris at the National Avenue shrine (fig. 6). Even though the Velvet Carnival is deliberately celebrated on a historically saturated day, organizers focus mainly on contemporary civic causes rather than national history. Like many North American students, Czech students in my course admitted that they knew little of their own history. Many had not even heard the title, “International Students’ Day,” and no one in class proudly announced that an impressive number of Charles University students had suffered or died for speaking the truth to power. So even though the Velvet Carnival is on 17 November, it is not about 17 November. In 2012 and 2013 a conceptual and spatial wedge separated the morning demonstration from the afternoon celebration. However in 2015 and 2016 the procession was becoming more overtly political, with marchers raising environmental issues, caricaturing politicians, and assuming an antiwar stance.
Scholars who study festivals comparatively across cultures should not assume that festivals, any more than monuments or public buildings, automatically feed collective memory. Even if they do, they may not do so deeply. Everything depends on how much is actually embodied by participants, so a major research problem is how to assess the historical and psychological depth of festivals. In doing this kind of research scholars cannot assume that either memories or values are exclusively verbal or visual. They can also be olfactory, tactile, sonic, and kinesthetic. It may be that participants do not even have to “know” (that is, be able to recite) their own history to be shaped by it. Memories, both cultural and personal, are embodied in multiple and various ways. People not only contain them in their heads or pour them out their mouths, they also sing and perform them. They sit, stand, and walk them as well.

**Reflexivity and Festivity**

Students of ritual, following Victor Turner, assume that rituals are reflexive. When you see your “self” in a mirror, that is a reflection. When you say, “I hurt myself,” “myself” is a reflexive pronoun. When our tribe or city enacts itself for itself in a way that forces us to think about who we are as a people, that is performative reflexivity. The instruments of reflexivity—whether rituals, songs, dances, dramas, works of visual art, media images, or scholarly critiques—are never perfect. In fact, distortion is one way of evoking reflexivity. Create a big-headed mask caricaturing a politician, put it on a short, merely human body, then beat drums around it, and viewers will be jolted into reflecting on their relationship to this public figure—and to power. Turner found this kind of distortion-evoked reflexivity in rites of passage. Reflexivity also suffuses festivals, and is displayed in processions and in an astonishing range of performances (Schechner [2002] 2013). Festive distortion can work for either good or ill. When it works for good, the outcome is self-awareness and cultural critique. When it works for ill, the result is self-aggrandizement and defensiveness.

In 2013, the second year of the Velvet Carnival, I was invited to Prague by Charles University’s Institute of Philosophy and Religious Studies to teach a graduate fieldwork course. I taught the first part of the term via Skype; for the last part, in person, we were in the field. One of the course’s goals was to produce written analysis and online audiovisual documentation of the Velvet Carnival. As if inoculating themselves, students in class often pointed cameras at each other and the projection screen through which I, tinted yellow, loomed from across the Atlantic Ocean. Then, in the classroom and in the actual fieldwork situation, everyone—spectators, tourists, scholars, even participants—were aiming cameras at each other. So the level of reflexivity, induced by media and academe, was high. Two of the Velvet Carnival’s primary organizers were graduate students; the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University constituted one of the initiatives in the parade; and students of religion and theatre were busy conducting audiovisual fieldwork on the public event. Ironically, about the only place to hide or find silence was inside a mask. Maskers reported to us that they could scarcely see, and they felt barely noticed except by a few friends or relatives. Most student researchers did not wear masks. Those who did complained about the visual and sonic isolation imposed by full-head masks. They said they had time to think, and to become connected to their own breathing patterns. So even though a festival or procession may be collective, wearing a mask creates a sense of isolation that may lead either to contemplation or a sense of isolation.

Asked whether the Velvet Carnival was a media event, an organizer replied, “No.” The answer was simple and clear. We do not do this for the media but for the community, the initiatives, and the participants. However, in 2013, when the media paid little attention to the
Velvet Carnival, organizers were disappointed that their images and messages did not have the cachet they had hoped for. In 2014 and 2015 organizers offered interviews, set up exhibits, wrote tracts, searched for usable photos, and commissioned music videos. So even though the Velvet Carnival is not primarily for the media, its organizers and participants are not indifferent to the media.

To my eye, figure 7 is emblematic of the 2013 Velvet Carnival. Widely noticed and repeatedly photographed by the media, Miss Teacher was the tallest, most powerful iconic presence. She stokes the imagination: Can’t you see that she has just finished greeting Jesus on the cross? No? Well, surely, you can tell that he has just been straining to whisper the secret of life and death into her ear, right? Meanwhile, some technician from Czech TV has been tracking the Teacher-Jesus conversation with a boom microphone hoisted high in the air. Surely you get that, don’t you? Well, if not, the photographic juxtaposition (Teacher, Jesus, microphone) might jolt your own questions: What is the relationship between these two characters on the bridge? What’s that thing intruding into the picture? What does the microphone capture that the naked ear cannot hear? The slowly moving, tall teacher invites query and reflexivity.

When spectators pointed to the tall lady and asked organizers or researchers, “Who is that?” the most common reply we heard was, “She’s the Teacher.” Since she was bouncing along in a procession, there was not much time for reflecting on her identity. However, she had considerable effect in the media and on spectators that our team interviewed, even upon those who did not know her multiple meanings.

Lenka Kubelová, creator of the image, said “The mask is a symbol of a repressive society full of prejudices in the context of working with socially disadvantaged children” (Kubelová 2014). Miss Teacher’s role in the 2013 procession was that of an oppressor to the Roma children.

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13. Martin Pehal argues that Barry Stephenson and I take the bridge seriously because we are visitors from elsewhere; Pehal would attribute less significance to it.
swarming around her skirt (fig. 1). Intent on socializing them into proper citizens, she shouted instructions: “Don’t fight. Say hello. Wait for others.”

A high degree of reflexivity may have inhibited organizers’ ability to see things from the point of view of ordinary spectators. Excessive self-awareness can cripple other-awareness. Since the Velvet Carnival is an emerging festival, organizers continually ask, “Do spectators get our meanings?” Even participants were asking each other, “What does this mean?” Spectators said they enjoyed the event, but many did not understand the meanings of the masks and emblematic objects (called *laterna*). Who are those people wearing buckets on their heads and dancing with brooms? Who is the tall lady with the skinny hands? Why does the pig have a clothespin on its nose, and why is it being burned? The procession was as likely to evoke consternation as wonder. There was a sizeable gap between meanings intended by organizers and meanings received by spectators.

Observers, noticing the teacher’s entourage, occasionally queried, “Oh, maybe those weird looking creatures swarming around her skirt are her pupils? But why do they have two faces, a distorted one at the front and a happy one at the rear?” The spectators who read brochures distributed by parade participants learned that the student masks represented Roma children, and that their distorted front faces were supposed to be the result of educational oppression. The smiling, rear faces were what they were expected to display to the public. In the parade there were prescribed costumes and objects as well as prescribed meanings, but many spectators did not know what the costumes and props indicated or only learned that later. So for a few observers we interviewed, the Teacher and Roma pupils were “deeply meaningful”; they demonstrated an acute social problem. But for many others the meaning of the tall lady and masked little creatures was shallow: “fun and festivity.”

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15. It would require more research to know whether the problem was created by reflexivity or some other factor, say, lack of experience in public festivity.

16. I couldn’t help wondering why the public faces were not forward-facing.
A few days after 2013 Velvet Carnival, Lenka, the maker of Miss Teacher, pointed out what few had noticed: that the Teacher’s head had been recycled from the 2012 parade, in which he was none other than Vladimir Putin (fig. 8). In 2013 only a few knew her by her true name, Paní učitelka Putinová (Teacher Putin). Only those who remembered the image from 2012 got the visual joke in 2013. In the unlikely event that viewers both remembered and understood, they could reflect on the similarities between heavy-handed teachers and heavy-handed rulers. But if they did not remember or understand the reference, their experience of the Putin head would be one-dimensional, flat rather than reflexive. By 2015 many participants had begun noticing and enjoying the irony of recycled heads: Oh, last year that was...

Whereas Basel’s Fasnacht is a balance of sonically and visually inflected reflexivity, Prague’s Velvet Carnival has so far been predominately visual and secondarily sonic and musical. The Swiss practice their music throughout the year and play it aggressively through the night, making the music a Fasnacht staple along with the masking. Music does not yet have this valence in the Velvet Carnival, but the situation is changing. Olga Cieslarová, Velvet Carnival’s primary organizer, described the 2015 procession:

We had a lot of fun with the mask-making and satirical topic, which was very political this year. Things in our country are going badly. Our president is a nightmare. He collaborates with Russia, commits xenophobic acts, and delivers hate speeches as Christmas messages. We focused on one big idea, the Ship of Fools (Narrenschiff). We Czechs played immigrant-fool-sailors in a boat along with politicians without aims or values. The boat was “protected” against aliens with barbed wire, but we did not notice that our boat was being dragged by Death. The procession was funny and threatening, just like the current situation in the Czech Republic. At night we continued walking in masks in the streets of Prague and playing music (as they do in Basel). This charivari (night walking) became intimate and nontheatrical. (Cieslarová 2016)

Two skeletons accompanied Death. Both were Basel musicians playing traditional marches. This kind of music, because it inspires vigorous, rhythmic processing, and because it can be heard for long distances, keeps up the group’s energy and signals the procession’s current location to both participants and spectators. Behind the ship was a Schlauchband playing Guggenmusik, which is ironic and dissonant, often riffing off popular tunes. This kind of music is more important for creating an atmosphere than for energizing the procession and keeping it coherent. By 2015 the musical exchange was going full circle (Sametové Posvícení 2015). Not only did Swiss musicians lead the Prague procession, but the Velvet Carnival sent a Schlauchband to Basel to play Guggenmusik and to experience firsthand the Swiss festival. Basel’s Fasnacht is an actual Carnival celebration in February, and Guggenmusik is meant to drive winter away, so it is deliberately noisy and discordant.

**Festive Religion in Public Space**

A widespread assumption is that Asian, African, and Latin American festivals are religious and ritualistic, whereas most European and North American ones are secular and nonritualistic. So a good research question is: how would we know whether a festival is ritualistic or religious? One might think that both questions would be easy to answer: just find or construct definitions of

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17. Bryn Scott-Grimes, my son, fieldwork assistant, and a professional musician, wrote his own musical interpretation of the festival (Scott-Grimes 2014).

18. Das Narrenschiff (The Ship of Fools) was written by German satirist Sebastian Brant (1457–1521), who attended the University of Basel.

19. This music can be heard in Romanclip (2015: 1:09–1:50).

20. It can be heard in Romanclip (2015: 3:25ff.).
both key terms, then see whether the test-case festival meets the criteria of inclusion and exclusion (which any formal definition must do). The obvious problem is that we can determine our answer by our choice of definitions. The second problem follows: one can spend forever on the definitional squabbles that surround “religion” and “ritual.” However, these terms are no different from other key terms in academic discourse. Since people argue less about adjectives than nouns (because nouns lead to essentialism, the great sin of postmodernism), we can sometimes get more actual (nondefinitional) work done by a sideways move: saying what qualities are religious or ritualistic about a given festival. This way, we are not saying that our test case is a religion or is a ritual, only that it has religious or ritualistic qualities, which we then proceed to illustrate.

In popular discourse it is common to identify religion with orthodox beliefs and ritual with collective liturgical practices, but this division of labor usually hardens into a static dualism or degenerates into an easy assumption that rituals enact participants’ beliefs. In Prague I found myself forced to take another tack, asking what values are implied by participants’ spatial practices. Czech graduate students in my fieldwork course mostly studied ancient Egyptian or Greek texts rather than contemporary Czech practices, so they were not going to be easily convinced by Charles Taylor that festivity is a new form of European religion. Sounding very much like the Dutch graduate students I taught previously, the Prague students insisted: Czechs are very secular. They don’t believe in God, they don’t go to church, and they do not sing hymns. In their view, the Velvet Carnival procession is no more religious than it is historical.

Organizers and participants regarded the Charles Bridge as a mere tourist attraction with no contemporary religious significance. Even though Velvet Carnival organizers chose deliberately and strategically to process the 516 meters of this saint-and-tourist-lined bridge spanning the Vltava River, they insisted that the procession is not religious. Why? Because the processing units were civic organizations and NGOs, not church organizations, and because neither the beliefs nor intentions of participants were explicitly spiritual or transcendent. The implication was that the location of the procession was irrelevant to its meaning. Intentions mattered; locations did not.

On the bridge one can witness visitors touching a small sculpture of St. John Nepomuk lying on his side. Before Jan became St. John, a Czech saint known across the globe, he was the queen’s confessor. When King Wenceslas IV inquired whether the queen was having an affair, Father Jan, so the story goes, staunchly defended the privacy of the confessional, thus the queen’s sex life. But his defense of the queen’s privacy cost him his life. The king ordered Jan to be tossed from the bridge in 1393—right here, where you are standing with your hand on the brass plaque (fig. 9).

Figure 9. Visitors touching a small plaque of St. John Nepomuk on Charles Bridge. Prague, 2013. (Photo by Barry Stephenson)

21. I have sorted out some of the definitional issues in “Religion, Ritual, and Performance” (Grimes 2012a).
22. In other words, I am not claiming, as Thomas Luckmann (1967) and Robert Bellah (1967) did, that there is a universal, inescapable, a priori religiosity. I am simply arguing that the place in which an action happens matters. For a critique of the a priori view see Weigert (1974).

23. Led by Ivanka Mariposa Čonková of Iniciativa Otrokem rasy. Čonková is a Roma activist and theatre student at Charles University. For more about her see Bystrého (2012).

24. The Roma organizers said their intention was to incinerate the pig farm by burning the pig. But among spectators interpretive ambiguity abounded. They asked: Is the pig the farm? What does pig-burning suggest to vegetarians? Are the farmers too pigs? Do the farmers get burned with the farm?

25. A different view of this stop in the park was articulated by Pepa Blažejovský, who remarked, “Two hours later we were at Kampa where the procession lost its energy. We were showing off in the park to nobody. Most of the people were pissed off that we had to go back to the piazzetta. A friend of mine described it very well; he said that he felt like he was in the middle of a theatre play and suddenly the characters stopped acting and they started explaining who they were” (in Svobodová 2014).
reimagined, revised, and even re-revised on the spot by participants. Liturgical acts can, in fact, be improvised, unless, of course, one rules out this possibility by definition.

Even if readers might not conclude with Taylor that European festivals are emergent religions, one should not overlook the fact that the Velvet Carnival is replete with ethical concerns, marked by brief moments of liminality, tinged with liturgy, and suffused with protoreligious narratives. Those who are inclined to judge the procession “not ritual” because of its improvisation and play still have to come to terms with processants’ actions, which are prescribed, stylized, and serious, as well as ludic.

Interpreters and theorists have to come to terms with participants who make masks, wear them, and walk in the procession, saying they find the Velvet Carnival quite meaningful even though they sometimes struggle to specify the meaning of this object or that action. One can argue, as Frits Staal does, that the multiplicity of meanings makes ritual meaningless, but one could just as easily counter that the multiplicity makes the actions hypermeaningful.

Religion has many forms, and only one of them consists of sacrally serious, long-lived, institutionalized, orthodox belief, and textually prescribed liturgical practice. Ultimately valued cultural forms can also be free-wheeling, unorthodox, ironic, ludic, or improvised. We are used to thinking of religion as a set of commonly held, explicitly espoused beliefs and prescribed ritual actions, but religion can be tacit and low-lying rather than explicit and high-profile.

26. Student fieldworkers reported a few major improvised decisions, such as the burning of the pig, and many small ones—for instance, some masks were made small since participants did not have enough time to create big ones.

27. Frits Staal is associated with the “meaninglessness of ritual” argument (Staal 1979). On the problem of meaning in music see Kramer (2002).

28. Such practices give rise to concepts such as invisible religion (Luckman 1967), civil religion (Bellah 1967), secular ritual (Moore and Myerhoff 1977), and ritualization (Grimes [1982] 2010; Bell 1997).
Mainline Western scholarship has a tendency to treat religion and ritual as the opposites of fiction, play, and improvisation, but there is precedent in Prague and other festival-rich cities for alternative conceptions. One could use these festive precedents (as well as academic theories) to make the interpretive turn that I am hinting at.

A few weeks prior to the 2013 Carnival, a cagey festival organizer whispered the name Jára Cimrman in my ear. The voice suggested that Cimrman was looking for me. Or maybe I was Cimrman? I had never heard of him, so I began to ask questions. Jára Cimrman, I was told, is credited with improving the balance wheel for Swiss watches, designing the base of the Eiffel Tower, creating the first puppet show in Paraguay, rotating the periodic table to its current position, and wearing his sister’s clothing.

The list of Cimrman’s accomplishments continues to grow as I write and you read. Reputedly based on an actual historical Czech (born in Vienna no less), Cimrman is the wise fool who exists nowhere but can appear anywhere (Gilfether 2013). Although Cimrman is fictive, Czechs take him seriously. Several people told me that in a 2005 media poll, he was voted the most popular Czech (but not actually given the award because he was not “real”).

Prague’s Velvet Carnival is religious, political, and musical in quixotic, ramshackle ways. It has not, or not yet, developed a liturgical canon. The Velvet Carnival is young, but pressures to canonize will inevitably emerge. The organizers are dead set against the routinization of charisma, the canonization of practice, and the bureaucratization of authority. They will resist allowing the declarative to displace the subjunctive, or the canonical to usurp the ludic. They are not the first to resist, nor will they be the last. Emerging festivals feed the human appetite to resist and reimagine.

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