

The Dynamics of Symbolic Resistance in the Film Die Gänseprinzessin (A Bakhtinian Carnavalesque and Scott's Infrapolitics Analysis)

Wisma Kurniawati¹, Lutfi Saksono², Meilita Hardika³, Ari Pujo Susanto⁴

¹German Literature Department, Surabaya State University, ²German Literature Department, Surabaya State University, ³German Literature Department, Surabaya State University, ⁴German Language Education Department, Surabaya State University

¹wismakurniawati@unesa.ac.id (first and Corresponding Author)

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ABSTRACT:

This study aims to investigate the dynamics of symbolic resistance and the forms of carnivalesque humor represented in Stoye's film, Die Gänseprinzessin. Using a qualitative approach and a cinematic narrative analysis method, this study dissects the function of humor in the film which is an adaptation of the fairy tale Die Gänsemagd, by examining how humor operates as a strategy of symbolic resistance against rigid, authoritarian hierarchies of power. The theoretical framework integrates Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, encompassing the indicators of ambivalent laughter, the grotesque body, and the suspension of hierarchy, together with Scott's theory of covert functions not only as entertainment but also as an effective instrument of infrapolitics. Ambivalent laughter, the performativity of the grotesque body, and symbolic profanation, represented through the protagonist Polly and marginal figures (the palace guards), succeed in demystifying the sanctity of the monarchy and the monopolistic culture of mourning imposed by the ruler.

Keywords: Humor, Symbolic Resistance, Carnavalesque, Infrapolitics, Hidden Transcript

I. INTRODUCTION

Literary and media studies of fairy tales have historically often been reduced to children's narratives serving merely as vehicles for instilling conventional morality. Zipes (1983; 2006), however, has successfully dismantled this view. He argues that fairy tales are, in fact, sites of ideological contestation and highly dynamic instruments of socialization. Zipes contends that the adaptation of fairy tales never takes place in a political or cultural vacuum: every re-articulation

of a pre-text carries subversive potential to dismantle hegemonic norms, revise patriarchal structures, and renegotiate the power relations prevailing in its era. This view aligns with Tatar (2003), who highlights how folkloric narratives carry transformative power to respond to social repression, collective trauma, and authoritarianism through metaphorical articulation and visual symbolism.

For instance, studies by Zipes (1983; 2006) and Greenhill and Matrix (2010) show that the

modern fairy-tale film adaptations they examined deconstruct the patriarchal messages of the classical fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm. Their research focuses on gender politics, women's emancipation, or the deconstruction of the "good vs. evil" binary, without deeply examining the aesthetics of the grotesque body and carnivalesque laughter as media of political resistance.

In the cinematic context, fairy-tale film adaptations function as diegetic systems that transform reality into discourse. As Metz (1991) states, film organizes elements of image, space, time, and characterization into a fictional world (diegesis) that carries a particular rhetorical function. From the perspective of role theory, character behavior in cinematic narrative is understood as parts and scripts that enact particular social positions within a systemic structure (Biddle, 1986). When such social scripts are dismantled through particular aesthetic choices, film shifts from being merely a passive medium of entertainment into a critical discursive field in which positions of power are symbolically negotiated (Billig, 2005).

The use of humor as a means of resistance has also been examined across various popular media. Yustil Hadi (2020) studied symbols of resistance in the film *Joker* through Roland Barthes's semiotics, finding that dark humor and hysterical laughter function as a form of rebellion against the repression of capitalist urban life. Juminto and Saksono (2021) examined resistance in the screenplay of the historical film *Sophie Scholl—Die Letzten Tage*, showing how verbal critique and discursive wit were used to resist the Nazi regime. Meanwhile, Suhaeb (2025) studied the comic figure *Kedok Menyong* in the *Singa Dangdut* performance tradition as a social representation that balances class tensions. In addition, Suaib et al. (2019) and Billig (2005) assert that humor is an ambivalent phenomenon that functions not only to manage social norms but also to rhetorically evade authority. However, most of these studies focus on macro-political narratives, realist tragedy, or traditional performance, and have not yet engaged with the domain of children's/family fairy-tale film

adaptation. Research by Ningsih and Kurniawati (2024) on the film *Die Gänseprinzessin* succeeded in mapping three carnival indicators (ambivalent laughter, the grotesque body, and the suspension of hierarchy) and connecting them broadly with James C. Scott's theory of resistance. They successfully identified forms of Bakhtinian carnivalesque humor.

The studies above provide a strong foundation for the present research; however, Zipes's and Tatar's studies of fairy-tale adaptation stop at textual or conventional narrative critique, without elaborating on how the performativity of the grotesque body and carnivalesque laughter are executed visually and cinematically to resist authority. The studies of humor as resistance conducted by Hadi (2020) and Juminto & Saksono (2021) tend to explore films laden with heavy political content or realist tragedy. Humor in children's fairy-tale film adaptations is frequently overlooked and reduced to mere slapstick comedy or politically meaningless bodily crudity, while the data mapping conducted by Ningsih and Kurniawati (2024) on humor in the film *Die Gänseprinzessin* still requires further refinement.

Previous research thus leaves a gap to be addressed. Based on this gap, the present study aims to describe how humor and bodily performativity in the film *Die Gänseprinzessin* operate as instruments of symbolic resistance against the rigid hierarchy of monarchical power, viewed through the lens of Bakhtinian carnivalism and Scott's infrapolitics. This study deconstructs the film *Die Gänseprinzessin* by integrating the theoretical frameworks of Bakhtin and Scott. Using a synthetic analytical model that combines Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque (focusing on ambivalent laughter, grotesque realism, and uncrowning) and Scott's infrapolitics (hidden transcript and weapons of the weak), this study aims to demonstrate that comic acts that appear "crude" or "simple", such as wordplay on excrement (Mist), flatulence sounds (Pupsgeräusch), acrobatic handstand movements, and the vandalism of a statue, which are not merely sterile children's comedy, but rather a highly structured strategy of infrapolitical

resistance aimed at dismantling the one-sided seriousness of monarchical rulers.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach focusing on cinematic narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis. The research instrument is the researcher. According to Sugiyono (2017), the researcher as instrument is the party who interprets the meaning behind visual and verbal data without manipulating variables.

The primary data source is the ARD television series *Die Gänseprinzessin* (2022), 58 minutes in duration, directed by Frank Stoye. Data collection was carried out through documentary techniques, including repeated viewings, transcription of German-language dialogue, and recording of scenes (units of analysis) containing elements of carnivalesque humor and acts of resistance. Data analysis adopts the model of Sugiyono (2017) and Miles & Huberman, comprising three stages:

1. Data Reduction: categorizing scenes and dialogue according to three Bakhtinian carnival indicators (Ambivalent Laughter, the Grotesque Body, Suspension of Hierarchy).
2. Data Display: systematically presenting units of analysis in the form of German dialogue transcripts together with scene context.
3. Conclusion Drawing/Verification: articulating empirical findings through the conceptual frameworks of Bakhtin's carnivalesque and Scott's infrapolitics.
- 4.

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The central conflict of *Die Gänseprinzessin* is triggered by a royal decree imposing a state of eternal mourning following the disappearance of the king's son. Under this official order, the king forbids laughter, as laughter is regarded as a direct threat to the stability and sanctity of power. As Bakhtin (1984) asserts, official culture always radiates a one-sided seriousness grounded in intimidation and fear. When laughter is forbidden, the character Polly emerges as an agent of subversion who uses humor as an

instrument to dismantle this one-sided seriousness.

III. 1. Ambivalent Laughter and Marketplace Speech

Ambivalent laughter is a carnival indicator in which joy and mockery merge completely. This laughter does not operate to physically destroy but rather to degrade the dignity of the ruler, so that a rigid order dies and a new, fresher life is born (Bakhtin, 1984; Kumar & Jyothirmai, 2023).

Data 1 (Duration 00:05–00:15): Wordplay on Mist

At the beginning of the film, in an opulent palace chamber shadowed by whispered tones owing to the ban on laughter, Polly makes a joke to the Palace Captain:

Polly: "Hauptmann, ist der König schon von seinem Morgenritt zurück?"

Captain: "Nein, Hoheit, aber es kann nicht lange dauern. Sein Pferd ist schon wieder da."

Polly: "Hauptmann, Sie sind das beste Pferd in unserem Stall."

Captain: "Danke, Majestät. Wirklich?"

Polly: "Ja. Sie machen den meisten Mist."

Analysis:

This dialogue is a manifestation of what Bakhtin (1984) calls marketplace speech. The initial compliment "Sie sind das beste Pferd in unserem Stall" (You are the best horse in our stable) is abruptly reversed into an insult through the justification "Sie machen den meisten Mist" (Because you produce the most dung). This semantic inversion exploits the double meaning of the German word *Mist*: literally, animal dung; figuratively (*Mist bauen/machen*), to make a serious blunder.

According to Bakhtin (1984), within carnival aesthetics, excrement (*copros/feces*) is not a purely negative image but rather cheerful matter symbolizing the fertility of the earth and renewal. By juxtaposing the rigid military rank of captain with the notion of animal dung, Polly performs a degradation of palace authority's dignity. From

Scott's (1985) perspective, Polly's wordplay operates within the agenda of the hidden transcript, in which resistance to a figure of authority is cloaked as a verbal joke, thereby sparing the actor from direct physical confrontation.

Data 2 (Duration 04:02–04:17): Subversion by the Marginalized in the Palace Corridor

This scene shows two palace guards in a formal corridor laughing uproariously as they repeat Polly's joke from Data 1:

Guard 1: "Sagt der Hauptmann: Danke Majestät. Ich bin wirklich Ihr bestes Pferd im Stall? Ja. Sie machen den meisten Mist."

Guard 2: "Stimmt. Passt genau! Ich bin wirklich das beste..."

Analysis:

The palace guards, as a subordinate group, reproduce lower-class verbal humor within the physical space of authority. Their laughter at their own marginal status—equated with a working horse and its dung—exemplifies free carnival laughter. This laughter temporarily liberates them from the oppressive burden of palace military discipline.

Scott (1990) categorizes this reproduction of humor as the insertion of the hidden transcript into the public corridor. The grand, tightly guarded palace corridor proves to contain a social fissure: institutional authority is deconstructed through animal analogy and a natural eruption of laughter that dismantles hierarchical tension right behind the ruler's back.

Data 3 (Duration 04:29–04:50): The Interruption of Pupsgeräusch into Official Protocol

Continuing the previous scene, the Palace Captain approaches the two guards to inspect the situation:

Captain: "Palastwachen. Meldung!"

Guard 2: "Herr Hauptmann, melde gehorsamst. Alles ruhig. (followed by a flatulence sound/Pupsgeräusch)"

Captain: "Keine Vorkommnisse?"

Guard 2: "Keine Vorkommnisse, Herr Hauptmann."

Captain: "Niemand hat gelacht?"

Guard 1: "Nein, Herr Hauptmann."

Captain: "Ihre Majestät will ausreiten. Satteln Sie sein bestes Pferd!"

Analysis:

The guard's formal report stating "Alles ruhig" (all is quiet) is abruptly undercut by an interruption of bodily gas (Pupsgeräusch). This is a function of what Bakhtin (1984) calls the material bodily lower stratum, which serves to degrade rigid, abstract situations. The sound of flatulence amid solemn military etiquette constitutes an embodiment of grotesque realism; the release of bodily gas materializes the tangible physical presence of the human body amid an official etiquette that seeks to disregard it.

The captain's suspicious question, "Niemand hat gelacht?" (Did no one laugh?), reflects the ruler's awareness of laughter's subversive power. Within the monarchical order, laughter is forbidden because it dissolves fear, while authority depends on fear to maintain its stability (Bakhtin, 1984).

In Scott's (1985) theory, the guards' act of nonetheless answering "Keine Vorkommnisse" (nothing happened) despite the audible sound of flatulence constitutes a strategy of conformity as a mask. They maintain the guise of public compliance (public transcript) to avoid disciplinary sanction, while simultaneously carrying out a symbolic sabotage that taints the sanctity of the protocol of power.

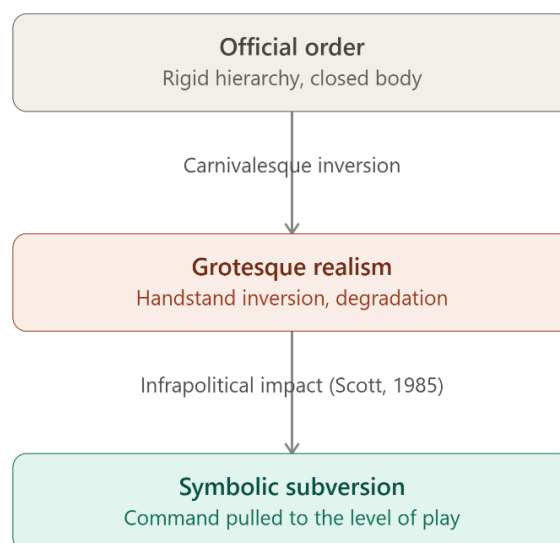
III. 2 Grotesque Realism and the Grotesque Body

The concept of the grotesque body refers to the representation of the human body as something open, unfinished, and dynamic, in contrast to the classic body, which is closed, perfect, and static (Bakhtin, 1984; Suhaeb, 2025).

Data 1 (Duration 03:47–03:56): Inversion of Military Command via Handstand

The character Polly positions her body upside down (in a handstand/acrobatic pose) in the palace corridor before the guards while shouting a military command:

Polly: "Stillgestanden!"



Analysis:

The word "Stillgestanden" (attention/stand at attention) symbolizes official culture's demand for hierarchical obedience. Uttering a military command while the body is acrobatically inverted constitutes a parody of authority (Bakhtin, 1984). In grotesque aesthetics, when the position of the buttocks attempts to take over the place of the head, a sociological and aesthetic reversal of hierarchy occurs. Polly uses her own body to defile the sanctity of the command of authority, transforming a moment of military obedience into a subversive acrobatic performance (Scott, 1985).

Data 2 (Duration 38:22–38:31): Anonymous Sabotage of the Prince's Statue

This scene shows the memorial statue of the missing prince in the palace courtyard modified by an anonymous perpetrator: the statue has been smeared with blue paint and fitted with a clown's characteristic red nose.

Analysis:

The vandalizing or modification of the prince's monumental statue into a clown figure (funny monster) is a perfect illustration of the concept of uncrowning and degradation (Bakhtin, 1984). The stone statue represents official culture that

claims eternity, seriousness, and monarchical silence. By affixing a clown's red nose and smearing it with paint, the statue is pulled down from the heaven of grandeur to the marketplace earth full of play and laughter. In carnival tradition, the red nose functions as a mask symbolizing joyful transformation and the rejection of uniformity (Bakhtin, 1984; Suhaeb, 2025).

In Scott's (1990) analysis of resistance, this act constitutes a form of anonymous, vandalistic symbolic resistance classified as sabotage. Because open confrontation risks capital punishment, the subordinate group carries out the anonymous destruction of symbolic property under cover of night. This is a rupture of appearance that visually damages the ruler's symbolic authority and exposes the people's suppressed anger (Scott, 1985).

Data 3 (Duration 02:58–03:26): Cosmic Pollution through Bodily Physiology

Polly, in front of two rigid palace guards, repeatedly passes gas, followed by a candid account of her digestive process:

Polly: "(farts) Oh, furchtbar!"

Polly: "Das klingt nach Rosenkohl."

Polly: "Ich hätte den Wirsing nicht essen sollen. (farts)"

Polly: "Und die Linsen zum Nachtsch." "

Polly: "Schönen langweiligen Tag noch!"

Analysis:

The repeated act of passing gas, within grotesque aesthetics, symbolizes the return of bodily consciousness and natural life amid a lifeless official situation (Bakhtin, 1984). By naming the foods she has consumed (Rosenkohl/Brussels sprouts, Wirsing/savoy cabbage, Linsen/lentils), Polly enacts a form of cosmic pollution: earthly matter (vegetables) is drawn into the drama of her body, while the lentils (Linsen), which she refers to as dessert (Nachtsch), parody the palace banquet, reducing a sweet dessert to a malodorous product of excretion (Bakhtin, 1984).

The closing line "Schönen langweiligen Tag noch" (have a wonderfully boring day) is a form of marketplace speech in the shape of an inverted wish. Rather than offering a polite farewell, Polly uses sarcasm to dismantle the expectation of formal courtesy. In Scott's (1985) theory, Polly's

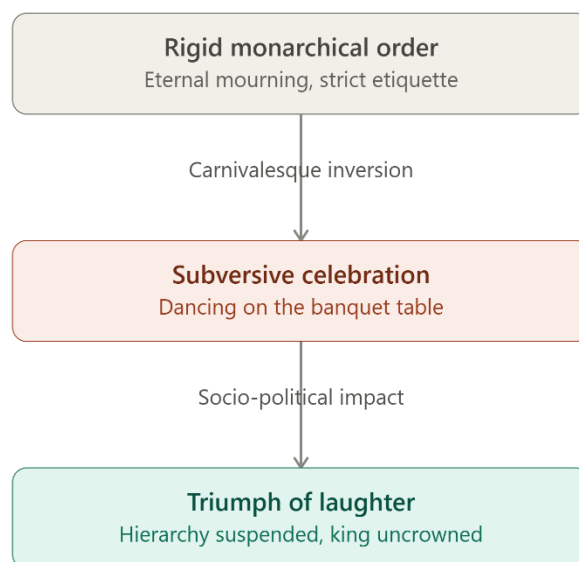
act of passing gas and speaking sarcastically before the guards constitutes a strategy of demystification. The weak use bodily functions regarded as taboo to undermine the symbolic glorification of the ruler and to strip away the mask of civility imposed by the monarchical structure.

III. 3 Suspension of Hierarchy

The suspension of hierarchy is a crucial carnival indicator in which privilege, rank, and etiquette are temporarily suspended, enabling free and familiar contact between people who are normally separated by class barriers (Bakhtin, 1984; Stevens, 2007).

Data 1 (Duration 52:33–55:24): Carnavalesque Triumph atop the Banquet Table

The film's closing scene depicts the climax of the celebration, in which Polly and Hagen leap onto the palace banquet table, dancing and performing silly, exaggerated movements, followed by all the people and the guards, while the King finally yields and smiles as he accepts the laughter.



Analysis:

This closing scene represents the ultimate triumph of laughter over the one-sided seriousness that had bound the kingdom throughout the period of mourning (Bakhtin,

1984). In the spirit of carnival, the imposed period of mourning is an official lie used to control the people. The laughter of Polly and Hagen functions as an instrument of liberation

that purifies the people's consciousness of fear (Bakhtin, 1984; Dentith, 1995).

The act of climbing onto the banquet table and dancing foolishly upon it constitutes material degradation. The banquet table, once a symbol of rigid monarchical etiquette and protocol, is transformed into a free stage of play. Carnival recognizes no separation between actor and spectator (no footlights); the entire palace audience and the people merge in laughter and a shared, equal biological reality (Bakhtin, 1984; Stevens, 2007).

The King's submission to laughter constitutes a ritual of symbolic uncrowning. By accepting humor and joining in the laughter, the king relinquishes his rigid authority and acknowledges the relativity of his power. The King is no longer seen as a sacred, separate figure but as part of the collective body of the people celebrating new life (Bakhtin, 1984). As Bakhtin (1984) states, history carries outworn forms of life to the grave through humor, so that humankind may bid a joyful farewell to its past.

From Scott's (1985; 1990) perspective, the king's submission to laughter constitutes an acknowledgment that the ruler's moral authority must now share space with the standards and desires of the people. The weak have successfully demystified the elite's irrational rules, proving that humor is a powerful weapon of the weak (weapons of the weak) for reclaiming control over freedom of expression.

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IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of cinematic data in the film *Die Gänseprinzessin*, this study concludes that the laughter and humor presented cannot be understood merely as passive comedic entertainment. Humor in this film operates on two mutually reinforcing levels: as an expression of Bakhtin's carnivalesque and as a practice of Scott's infrapolitics (covert resistance).

Through the indicators of ambivalent laughter, the grotesque body, and the suspension of hierarchy, this film shows how laughter serves a dual function: celebrating abundant bodily life while gradually eroding the legitimacy of official power. The use of degrading wordplay (Mist), bodily sounds (Pupsgeräusch), acrobatic inversion (handstand), statue sabotage (uncrowning), and dancing atop the banquet table are shown to constitute a safe strategy of symbolic resistance (hidden transcript) that allows subordinate groups to demystify rigid monarchical authority without engaging in repressive physical confrontation.

This study makes an academic contribution by demonstrating that modern fairy-tale film adaptations can function as critical discourse for dismantling authoritarian orders. Its implications open avenues for further research examining how the logic of carnival and infrapolitics can be transformed into other contemporary media of humorous expression, such as social media satire and political memes in modern popular culture.

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