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Beneath the *Laarve*: Masking during the Basel Carnival of Fasnacht (*Faasnacht*)[1]

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Abstract

Describing the historical development of the mask (*Laarve*)[2] within the carnival tradition of the Basel Fasnacht (*Faasnacht*, Switzerland) during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this article offers a case study of the so-called reflexive turn in late modern ('post-traditional') societies. Drawing on the concept of ritual reflexivity, we argue that the gradual development of the Fasnacht masks into oversized constructions covering the ritualist's whole head (*Laarve*) went hand in hand with the development of various other ritual mechanisms aimed at facilitating within the ritual framework a meditative, inward-oriented stance (*enstasis*).[3] This is especially interesting as carnivals tend to be associated with precisely the opposite dynamics: transcending social norms through the celebration of excess and inebriation which, in its extreme forms, may lead to *ekstasis* (or at least a headache). The described ritual elements are interpreted as a series of mirroring mechanisms nested within one another. The ritual handling of the *Laarve* by the ritualists (its donning and taking off at regular intervals) is then understood simultaneously as a facilitator and a marker fuelling and isolating individual phases of an otherwise non-discrete reflexive process. Based on first-hand accounts of ritualists' experiences of mask-wearing, we will show how Basel Fasnacht walks a tightrope between 'modelling' and 'mirroring' societal, communal and idiosyncratic levels of meaning-making.

Keywords

Fasnacht, masks, ritual, satire, *enstasis*, modernity, carnival

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Introduction

At the theoretical core of this ethnographic, diachronic analysis of the Basel Fasnacht masking tradition is the question about the dynamics of social change facilitated by ritual and self-identity. The starting point of our argument is that human societies, groups and individuals constantly develop mechanisms that allow them to reflect (consciously or not) on their own functioning. These reflexive mechanisms are necessary if symbolic systems are to adapt to changing conditions, be they political, ecological or other. At the same time, sense-making dynamics – mediating between the society as a whole and its individual members – are necessary if symbolic systems are to be capable of providing means of conceptualising the human experience of being – an idea harking back all the way to the pragmatist philosophy of George H. Mead.[4] Authors such as A. Giddens, S. Lash, U. Beck, P. Heelas ('reflexive modernity') and others argue that modern ('post-traditional') societies radically altered the dynamics of the framing of the self, marked especially by a heightened level of reflexivity: '[…] the more societies are modernized, the more agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them in that way.' (Beck, 1994: 174)[5], forcing individuals to '[…] innovate rules in a bricolage of their own identities' (Lash, 1999: 3). Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that reflexivity is central element of 'traditional' societies as well, with certain forms of rituality – especially carnivals – being one of the most prominent performative reflexive mechanisms, often leading to criticism and change: 'ritualizing is not incompatible with criticism, nor is a sense of mystery incompatible with iconoclasm, provided self-critical actions are embedded in rites themselves, and provided the timing of criticism is carefully chosen.' (Grimes, 1992: 32). Masks – the main topic of this study – then represent a specific tool that illustrates the process of merging seemingly static cultural forms (masks and their use are strictly codified within the Fasnacht tradition) and highly individualised experiences. If we understand masks as static, materialised forms of 'reflection' (they depict certain objects, beings or their combinations), then the way the ritualists utilise them may enable the rise of genuine reflexivity, that is, the reflection of the masks' ability to reflect certain categories. This reflexivity is then channelled within the ritual framework onto higher levels of social organisation, potentially causing socially acceptable change: 'We voice our dissatisfaction clearly and openly. Though it is not a call to open rebellion.'[6] Rituals do not cause social seismic shifts, even though these can become ritualised.[7] The aim of such a process is to absorb and institutionalise their potential for change, and thus transcendental potency, which can then be utilised for the well-being of the whole group.[8] This essay proceeds from a general theoretical account of the role of reflexivity in societies as such, gradually focusing on carnival as a more specific form of public festivities/rituals, all the way down to the individuals and their experiences in the various ways they interact with the mask.

Carnivals as reflexivity-enabling performative frameworks

A basic prerequisite for the emergence of reflexive dynamics within ritual frameworks is that ritualists find themselves in (and are aware of) a simultaneously valid position of

(passive) objects and (active) subjects. Rituals therefore 'subjectify objects' and 'objectify subjects', leading, for example, to the typical elements of the carnivalesque: inversion of social roles, merging of animal and human entities, repurposing tools and objects, uncovering and parading that which under 'normal' circumstances stays hidden (sexualised activities, defecation and physiological processes in general).[9] To conceptualise this process, we may utilise D. Handelman's concept of 'framing',[10] that is, the specific performative setup which enables the distinction between ritual (special) and not-ritual (common) activities, or the 'inside' and the 'outside' during a ritual performance. The primary aim of this framing process is not to dichotomise, but precisely the opposite: it enables the ritual activities to acquire meta-communicative (reflexive) potential by bringing '[…] into being the shift from one reality to another, through communicating how the inside of the frame, the ritual reality, is to be perceived and practised by those who enter into it […] the frame is *asking*, as it were, how its meta-messages are to be applied towards whatever the frame encloses.'(Handelman, 2006: 572). Framing enables one to interpret the same or similar activities as very different transformations of one another (e.g. eating bread as means of sustenance and eating bread as part of the Roman Catholic eucharistic ritual). Furthermore, frames are not static constructs, but acquire new meanings through gradual change, often in the form of relatively minor performative alterations. Goffman (1974: 82) likens it to 'layers of lamination' of the given frame, adding complexity ('layers') to the meaning. Handelman expands Goffman's frame idea by literally twisting it into a Moebius ring: '[t]he ritual frame opens to the outside while enabling itself to be practised as relatively closed. The Moebius surface is twisted on itself so that the inside of the surface turns into its own outside, its outside into its inside [… enabling the] exterior and interior to interpenetrate, while keeping them separate.' (Handelman, 2006: 578). Within the ritual process, the macro-cosmic meaning-making elements (cultural/social level) are therefore organically interlinked with the often-idiosyncratic microcosms of the involved ritualists in a wide spectrum of contexts. This frameshifting is characterised, on the one hand, by their mutual relativisation (e.g. through carnival inversion and employment of humour), and, on the other hand, by simultaneous affirmation of the larger societal framework (rituals, even carnivals, tend to have segments bound by very strict rules which strengthen the status quo): 'The world is transformed without being turned upside down' (Fernandez, 1980: 32). Reflexive inversion is therefore the hallmark of carnivals, which utilise various forms of parody, satire, clowning, masking which all relativise seemingly standardised sets of subject–object relations, thus, paradoxically, strengthening them at the same time by exaggerating difference. Carnival inversion requires a (seemingly) fixed subject–object relations framework the perversion of which it can then present. Just like the Moebius ring, we see that this inverse 'mirroring dynamic' turns onto itself, giving rise to a 'modelling dynamic', which strengthens the status quo, which then again facilitates its own mirroring inversion – in an infinite Moebius loop. Any potential change of the system will, therefore, always be structurally compatible with the status quo – up until the moment actual heads start rolling off the *guillotine*. Every structurally inverse model always includes the threatening potential of complete destruction, which infuses it with precisely the right amount of thrilling attraction, as when watching a tightrope walker.[11] In fact, we can think of symbolic systems as

precisely such highly skilled symbolic tightrope walkers – always on the precipice, yet mostly never falling to their doom.

Mirrors and masks

Another form of indexical expression of the reflexive nature of ritual processes is the usage of actual mirrors in ritual performances. A mirror 'reflects an image of the self that the eye is unable to see directly, because it traps light, because the effect of the reflection is to reveal an unseen "other", and because it faithfully reproduces its subject while making it seem different—that is, reversed.' (Melchior-Bonnet, 2005: 6063). Out of the plethora of meanings attributed to mirrors throughout human history,[12] by reversing the horizontal plane while maintaining the vertical, the enantiomorphic effect seems to be a very functional (and a transcultural) metaphor of the status of the dead, with the Netherworld and the world of the living being mirror images of one another. This idea is also strengthened by a second "trick' of plane mirrors: given the reflective properties of light, plane mirrors (as opposed to concave ones) create virtual images appearing to be located behind the surface of the mirror, as if inhabiting/coming from another world. This is a very potent source of images for conceptualising the ultimate "other': in many symbolic systems, mirrors must be turned or covered during funerary rites as to prevent some form of misfortune. If mirrors produce dynamic reflections, then a static physical mask may be thought of as a fossilised moment of this dynamic mirroring process. In the following paragraphs, we will try to illustrate the above-mentioned dynamics and aspects on the development and usage of masks during the Basel Fasnacht carnival. First, however, the Basel Fasnacht as such must be introduced.

Basel, Fasnacht and Satire

Basler Fasnacht[13] – in 2017 registered by UNESCO in the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of mankind – is the biggest Swiss carnival. It starts on the Monday after Ash Wednesday.[14] Historically, the development of such a large event is rather exceptional for a protestant city – compared to the long-standing carnival tradition in the nearby catholic German Rhineland (Cologne, Mainz, etc.). At exactly four o'clock in the morning (*Mòòrgestraich*) in the centre of town, all the streetlights go out, the traditional Fasnacht sound of the piccolos and drums floods the streets, and the masked participants – grouped in their respective cliques (*Glygge, Glyggene*) – start to move through the town (this part of the ritual is called *gässle*, from the German word *Gasse*, 'alley'). The festival ends 3 days later, at four o'clock in the morning on Thursday. With approximately 20,000 Baslers actively participating in the festival (and another at least 100,000 onlookers), the city is turned upside down over the course of these 72 h (though in a rather orderly manner) and unwritten albeit firmly set carnival rules apply. Concealing one's face behind a mask is – for the active participant as opposed to the viewers – the first and most important of them all. Fasnacht is also something that one does not attend as an individual but as part of a group or clique. This primarily refers to groups of musicians, some of which date back to the end of nineteenth century. Cliques are made up of pipers (*Pfyffer*) and drummers (*Dambuure*), who play various melodic tunes (often of military origin) on

their Basler piccolos and drums as they march, and the vanguard (*Vòòrdraab*) in front, which clears the way and hands out satirical pamphlets (*Zeedel*). In addition to cliques, Fasnacht also features brass bands (*Gùggemuusig*), satirically themed floats (*Wàage, Schàase*). The second half of the twentieth century has also witnessed the emergence of smaller musical ensembles (also play piccolos and drums) which randomly march through the streets of Basel, primarily at night. These groups form the so-called Wild Fasnacht (*Wildi Faasnacht*), as they define themselves in direct opposition to the 'orderly' cliques.[15] The highlight of the Fasnacht program is the afternoon parades (*Cortège*) that take place along a ring route throughout the centre of town on the afternoons of Monday and Wednesday of the festival. Using masks (*Laarve*), costumes (*Gòschdyym*), pamphlets (*Zeedel*) and decorated lanterns (*Ladäärne*) and constructions, participating groups present current social issues in a satirical manner (*Sujet*, see Images 1–5). The active involvement of professional artists lends a visually striking quality to Fasnacht, rendering the festival an original display of social commentary every year. The masks are at once humorous (serious issues are expressed in an ironic manner) and to some extent scary (due to the sheer number of masked visages). This often-provocative spectacle views local, national and international topics through a critical lens and aims to incite interest in public affairs (Figures 1 to 7).

Figure 1. Every member of the Basler Bebbi Basel clique made their very own Laarve and unique cardboard tower as a response to the exhibition in Seville, Spain, where Switzerland's submission consisted of a banal cardboard tower.
Source: Fasnacht 1996, photograph by Markus Tschalär.

Figure 2. The editor-in-chief of the local paper Die Basler Zeitung harboured right-wing sympathies and selected the publication's content accordingly. Reading the paper made the hair of many locals stand on end.
Source: Fasnacht 2012, photograph by Adam Dědič.

Masks and Basel *Laarven*[16]

The theoretical literature devoted to (carnival) masking only in Europe is immense.[17] In Basel, a mask (worn on the head) is exclusively referred to as a *Laarve* (pl. *Laarven*). *Laarven* are larger than the size of a human face, and usually artistically expressive. Due to their size, *Laarven* do not normally rest on the person's face, creating a distance between the inside of the mask and the wearer's face. The term mask (*Massge*) is also used in Fasnacht, though it refers to the entire look: 'It refers to everything the person is wearing. The mask (*Massge*) consists of the *Laarve* worn on the head (often including a wig or a hat) and the costume (*Goschdym*), that is, the apparel. This also includes other accessories, such as gloves, props, tools, etc.' (Christen, 1984: 4) The Basler expression *Massge* is translated in this text as a 'masked person,' the term *Laarve* refers to the Basler mask to denote contemporary usage, and the word 'mask' is employed in a more general sense. The distinction between mask and *Laarve* will also aid in elucidating the development throughout the twentieth century. It could even be said that the mask gradually evolved into the *Laarve*. It was a process of progressively growing proportions, which spurred, as shall be explored later in this text, a change in the experience within (Figure 9 and 10).

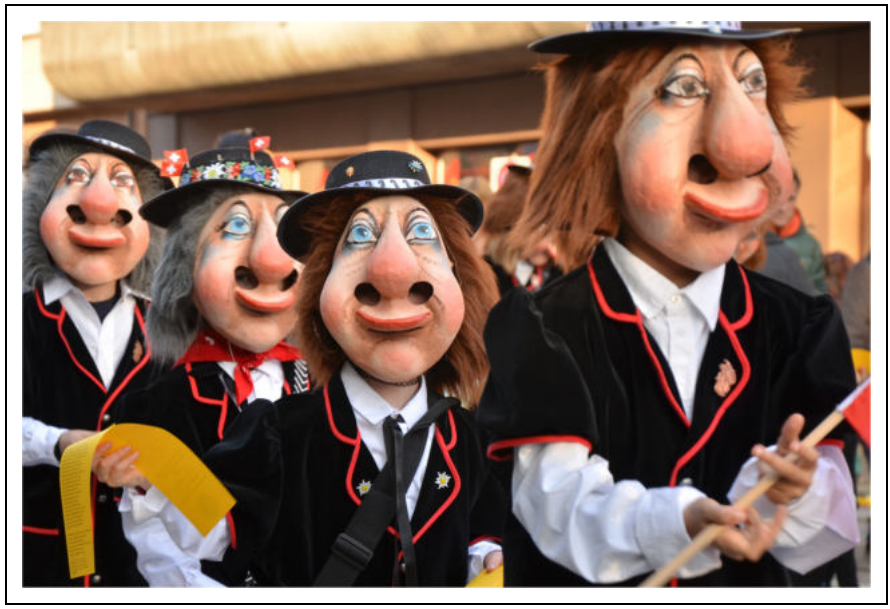

Figure 3. The clique responds to the anti-migrant sentiments that abound in small-town Switzerland where locals ironically have virtually no contact with any immigrants.
Source: Fasnacht 2014, photograph by Adam Dědič.

Historical development of the Basel *Laarve*

Phase 1: Developing the form

The origin of modern-day Fasnacht dates to the end of the second half of the nineteenth century. Until then, various carnival celebrations had taken place throughout Basel which resembled the carnival festivities in other regions, including the use of masks. 'Most of the masks would be purchased in Germany, which is only a few kilometres from Basel, as carnival culture was much more widespread there.'[18] The turning point came after the First World War. Heightened political tensions between Germany and Switzerland meant that the Baslers no longer wanted to buy their Fasnacht masks from German craftsmen and thus decided to start their own production (Wunderlin, 2005: 245).

In 1921 the Basler Clique *Olympia* asked Paul Rudin, a backstage painter in the city theatre, to make masks for their satirical Fasnacht *Sujet* (Trachsler, 2004: 44). He decided to make them with plaster negatives and papier mâché. This technology quickly established itself in Basel. In 1925, the *Kunstkredit* announced a competition for *Laarven* designs, carried out by atelier Metraux and Bucherer and soon the studios of Adolf Tschudin and Roger Magne saw a big upswing in demand and became the leading producers of *Laarven* (Gantner, 1985: 242; Peter, 2022).

Figure 4. The Basler Bebbi Clique engages with the creation of identity on social media, including the loss of privacy. In addition to the papier-mache larvs, it is also possible to see other playful variations of the traditional style on Fasnacht.
Source: Fasnacht 2014, photograph by Adam Dědič.

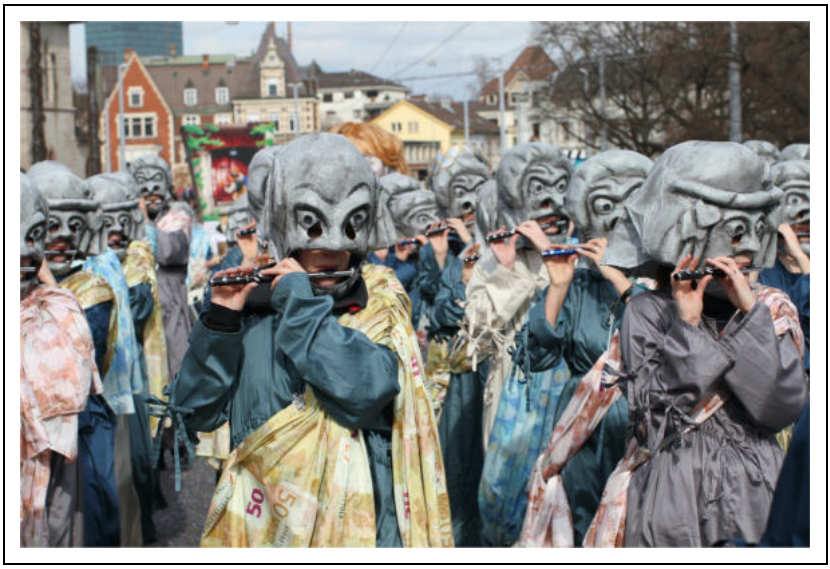

Figure 5. Sujet: Nothing new to Zeus, themed the high state debt of Greece and the influence of the EU.
Source: Clique Opti-Mischte, Fasnacht 2011, photograph by Magnus Roth.

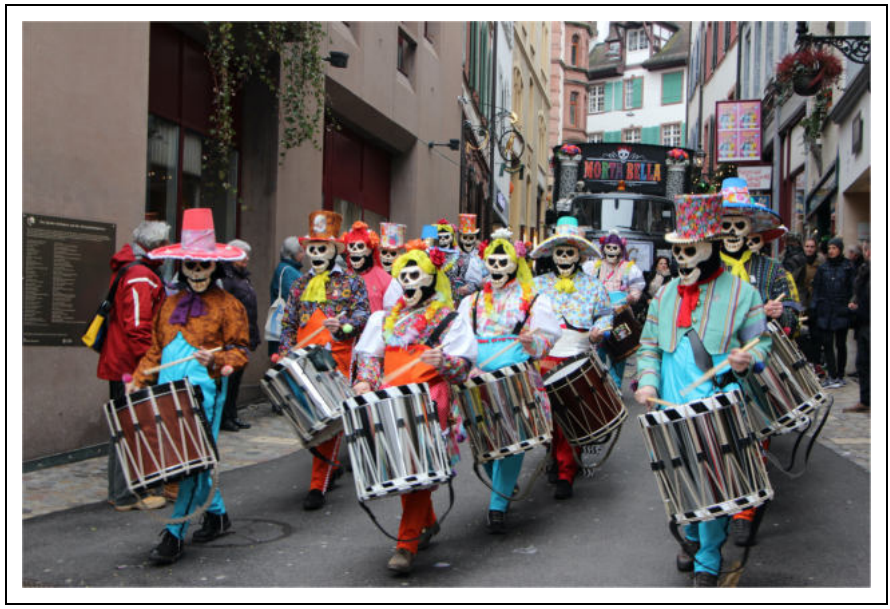

Figure 6. Sujet: 'Mortabella' treats assisted dying as a cheerful procession with colourful costumes with skull masks. The topic is portrayed positively, as in numerous cultures, for example, Mexico.
Source: Clique Basler Mittwoch Gesellschaft 1907, Fasnacht 2016, photo from their archive.

The first milestone in the Basel tradition of mask production was thus the desire to make masks their own way, to free themselves from their neighbours (this is still a recurring theme of Fasnacht) and to find their own production method (Blum 1999: 8–10; Gantner, 1985: 236–241; Trachsler, 2004: 40–45). They tried different materials (wax, wood, copper, wire, etc.) but eventually settled on papier-mâché.[19] This material is cheap, practical, easy to mould and most importantly, lightweight for wearing. 'With that material, an infinite amount could be achieved, *Laarven* could be produced in all sizes and variations.' (Peter, 2022) The masks were often designed and hand-painted by renowned artists,[20] which lent a unique visual quality to the masks in Basel. For this reason the new generation of masks has been called also 'Basler Künstlerlarve', Basel artist's *Laarve*.[21] As early as the 1930s, two-thirds of all mask production for Fasnacht took place in the Magne studio (Wunderlin, 2005: 246). By the early 1950s, Magne focused exclusively on the production of Fasnacht masks, keeping the studio busy all year long. Until today, it is quite commonplace for Fasnacht workshops to operate year-round. In 1934, the owner of the studio, Alfons Magne, presented an invention, the so-called *Güpfi* (from the German word *Gipfel/Gupf* – peak or summit).[22] It was a papier-mâché hat that was moulded into the shape of the crown of the head onto which the mask could be attached (Wunderlin, 2005: 248). It was thus no longer necessary to fasten the mask using an elastic band. The *Güpfi* fit better and was more comfortable to wear.

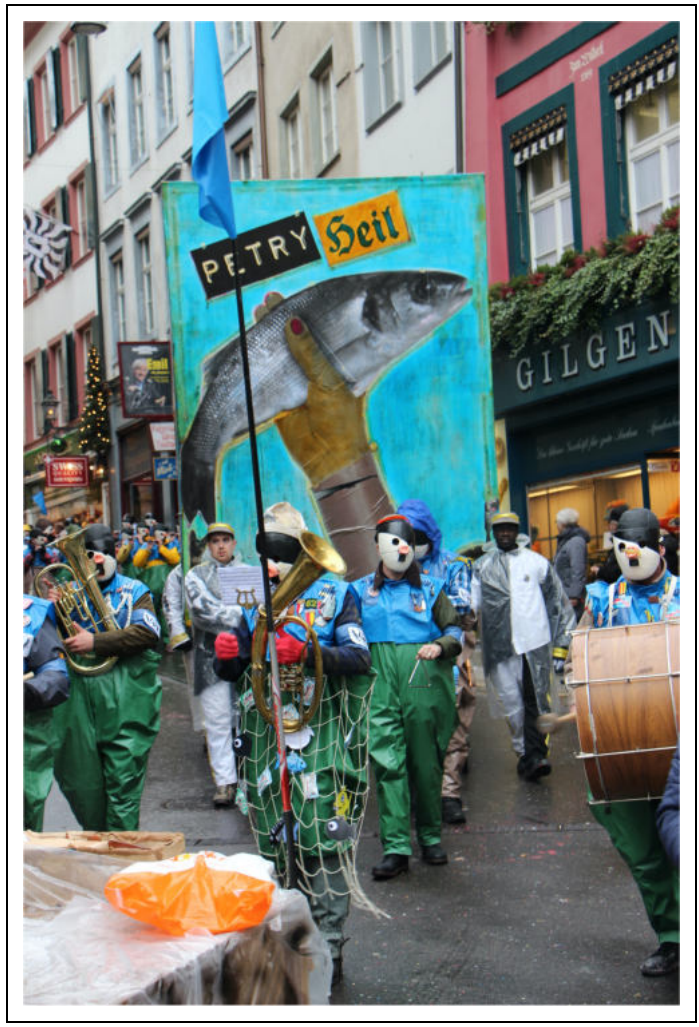

Figure 7. Sujet: 'Petry Heil' deals with right-wing extremism in Germany, the title is a combination of the German fisherman's salute, the name of Frauke Petri, the head of the AfD and the word 'Heil' from the Third Reich. The costumes show fishermen with larvae with pig noses and Hitler hairstyles.
Source: Clique Basler Mittwoch Gesellschaft 1907, Fasnacht 2017, photo from their archive.

Phase 2: From masks to Laarven

This ushered in the second important milestone in the development of the Basler mask. This is the moment in which the mask began to move away from the face, marking the transition from the mask to the *Laarve*: 'There are several disadvantages to wearing a papier-mâché mask too closely to the face. If it isn't a completely perfect fit, it's very

Figure 8. Group at Charivari, participants can choose any Laarve and costume they want. Source: Author's photo archive.

unpleasant to wear. People also sweat and the exhaled moisture they breathe out stays trapped in the mask, which gets wet and soggy as a result. If the mask is attached to a *Güpfi*, it stays in place much better and maintains its shape longer.'[23] This new structural element also opened the doors for new techniques to be used. Other props could also be attached directly onto the *Güpfi* instead of being attached separately after the mask had been fastened to the head with an elastic band. A wig could be glued onto the *Güpfi* and hair could be sewn onto it, meaning everything could be tried on and adjusted in advance, which made it more comfortable to wear during the long hours that Baslers spend marching in their *Laarven* during Fasnacht. It also meant that the masks that were being produced and worn could take on larger and larger proportions. This is especially obvious in case of the character of the *Waggis*:[24] its nose got bigger (a mask fastened with an elastic band would be weighed down by a big nose), followed by the mouth and eyes, until the entire mask became significantly larger than the human face (see Images 9–12). Over the past few decades, papier-mâché *Güpfi* have largely been replaced by plastic construction helmets. They fit better on the head and can be freely adjusted as needed. These perfectly fitting contraptions can carry the weight of even larger masks and even more accessories. The oversized dimensions of these masks are accompanied by very distinctive features and expressions. However, it must be said that there are still some limits to these extreme proportions, as the mask must still be comfortable to

Figure 9. Old papier-mache, glued canvas or even wicker masks. Their size corresponds to the size of a human face. Collection of the Museum der Kulturen Basel, currently on display at the Fasnachtsausstellung.
Source: Author's photo archive.

wear. Some *Laarven* are enormous in size,[25] though the emphasis on comfort during the long hours spent in the masks has resulted in constructions that are only a few centimetres larger than the human face (Figures 11 to 18).

Laarve as a tool for achieving carnival *enstasis*

Having outlined the historical development of the Basel mask, that is, its transformation into the *Laarve*, the following paragraphs will relate it to the ritual reflexive dynamics identified in the introductory section of this essay. The central argument is that the way the *Laarven* are used and utilised throughout the Fasnacht festivities entices within the ritualists a certain form of inward reflexivity – *enstasis*. This is especially interesting as traditional carnivals tend to be characterised by precisely the opposite tendency – transcending social norms through the celebration of excess and inebriation which, in its extreme forms, may lead to *ekstasis* (transcending consciousness): 'The *Laarve* basically creates an additional barrier against the ecstatic. It guarantees "anonymity" at first, so one might be tempted to transgress the rules. But it is rather impractical for spontaneous escape. And because it is worn in groups, chaos and spontaneity does not take place.'[26] This enstatic, inward-oriented effect of the *Laarven* is enhanced by various means (described below) throughout the Fasnacht ritual framework. It is also noteworthy that

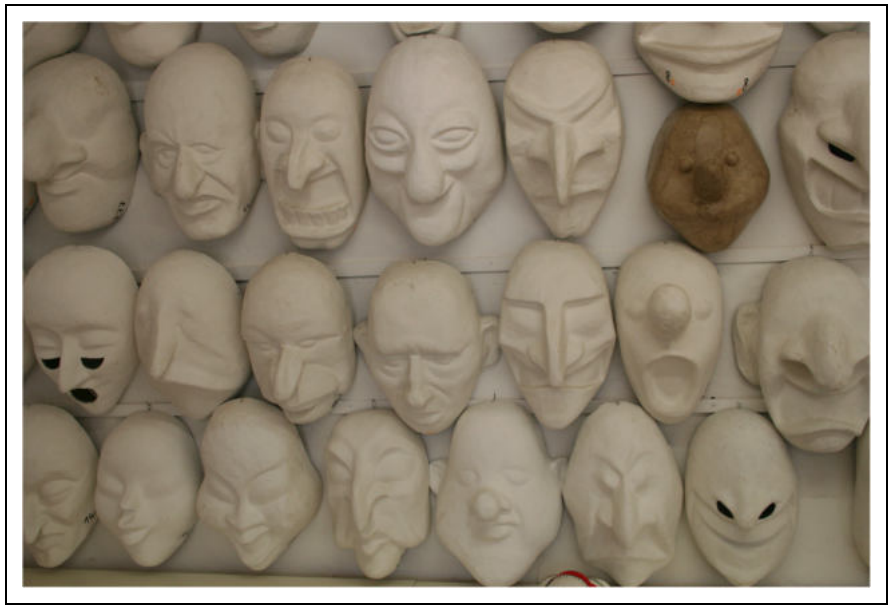

Figure 10. Prototypes of Laarve to choose from in Tschudin studio. They are larger, and some already have eye cutouts under the 'eyes of the mask'. Exposition in Ortsmuseum Binningen. Source: Author's photo archive.

the transformation of the mask into the *Laarve* commenced at the beginning of the twentieth century – that is, precisely during the period which authors such as Giddens, Beck and Lash consider as marking – within the Western context – major societal shifts leading to the development of the so-called 'post-traditional' societies (see 'Introduction'), characterised by heightened stress on various forms of fluidly reflexive identity-making dynamics. The following paragraphs then present an illustrative case study of precisely these social dynamics of late modernity.

Laarve as a group mask

It is important to realise that *Laarven* function collectively as group masks. On Monday and Wednesday, all members of cliques (*Glyggene*) wear the *Massqe* specifically selected by the group for that year's satirical theme, composed of the *Laarve* and the costume (the theme is supplemented by a satirical pamphlet and a *Ladäärne*). All these elements come together in a symbolic display, conveying the group's stance (ideally satirical) towards the given subject. Smaller groups work closely together through all the preparatory phases. However – especially in case of the larger cliques – the individual has little say when it comes to selecting the theme. It is usually chosen and workshopped by a selected committee (*Sujetkomission*), *Laarven* are often crafted by professional mask-making ateliers. During the central ritual phase (i.e. when the clique walks through the dimly-lit Basel streets playing their piccolos and drums), for the onlooker, the individual

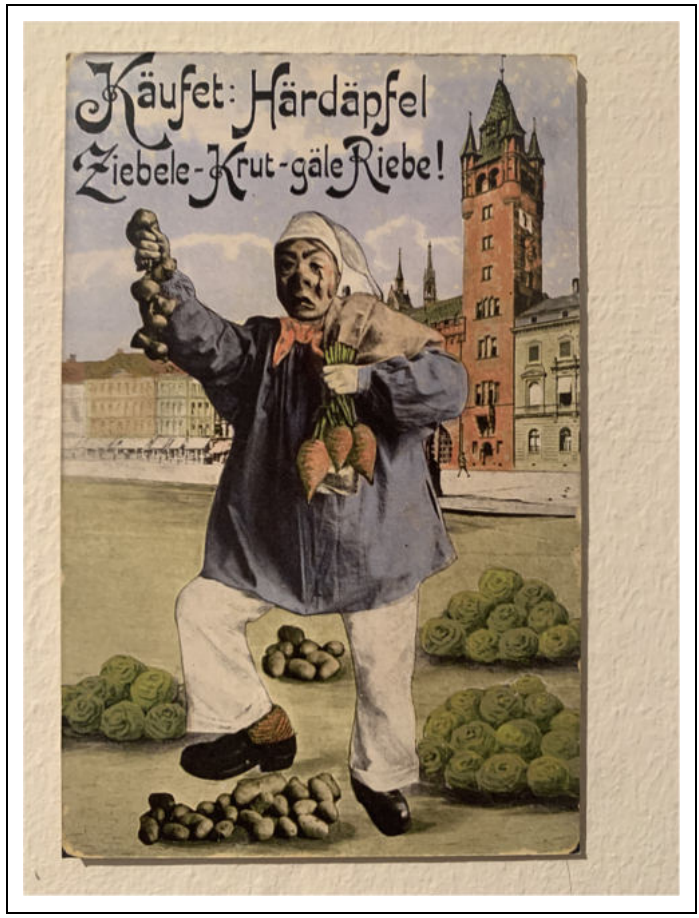

Figure 11. Postcard with a Waggis from 1910, part of the collection of the Museum der Kulturen Basel, currently on display at the Fasnachtsausstellung.
Source: Author's photo archive.

is thus completely absorbed by the group, clad in precisely the same outfits: 'The *Laarve* is my second face. For those looking on from the outside, it is no longer me, but rather the character that I am portraying. At the same time, I do not feel like *Waggis* either. I only know that I am wearing *Waggis*.'[27] The collectivising effect of *Laarve* is strengthened by the strictly synchronised form of movement to the sound of the military-style marches which the cliques play throughout the duration of Fasnacht (see below).

Laarve creates a meditative space through isolation

The gradually growing dimensions of the *Laarve* enabled that it ceased being pressed up against the mask-wearer's face but is instead fastened to the *Güpfi* creating a certain

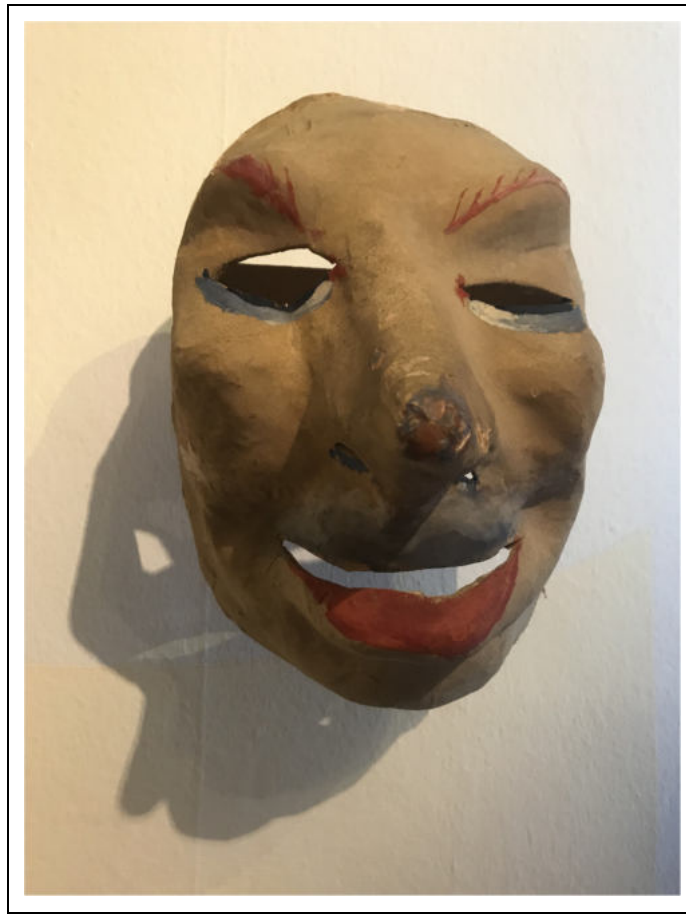

Figure 12. Waggis Laarve from 1922 (made by Atelier Adolf Tschudin), part of the collection of the Museum der Kulturen Basel, currently on display at the Fasnachtsausstellung (VI 11184). Source: Author's photo archive.

distance, a few centimetres in length, between the mask and the face. We want to claim that this tiny space is the crucial instrument enabling the ritualists to enter a very private and meditative state of inward reflexion (*enstasis*): 'During *Gässle*[28] you are there for yourself even if you march in a band of drummers and flute players. At *Gässle* you are hidden in your *Laarve*, in your heart, hidden from the wind, the cold and the looks of others. […] During *Gässle* you suddenly understand the meaning of the wish "Enjoy it!" (*vyyl Vergniege*!). At *Gässle* you are in seventh heaven. This is true even when it's raining cats and dogs.' (Bürgi, 1974: 12). Some participants refer to it as 'meditation, balance,'[29] others call it a 'trance,'[30] or 'timelessness'[31] or simply 'solitude'[32], immersion into the self, self-reflection and calm contemplation. 'I never have as much time for myself as I do in my *Laarve* during Fasnacht. I'm also never so alone. I am

Figure 13. Waggis prototypes by Tschudin studio from the 30s, the growing nose is markable. Exhibition in the Ortsmuseum Binningen 'Basler Künstler-Larven 1925–1984'.
Source: Foto Werner Kern.

aware of the other members of the *Glygge* around me. But they're each wearing a *Laarve*, and so during the procession they're not real people but rather figures.'[33] For the ritualist, the mask functions in the same way as an inverted mirror: objects of the outside world are being projected through the limited visor of the eye cutouts. 'The shell is protection from the outside, and at the same time something foreign.'[34] Just as one sees the inverted reflection of oneself in a mirror as if coming from beyond its surface (in some religious contexts identified with the Netherworld/land of the ancestors, see above), for the mask bearer, this effect is now inverted and attributed to the actual world. This mirroring effect is achieved precisely by drawing the mask a few centimetres away from the bearer's face, which brings the eye cutouts into the wearer's visual field. This has the same effect as if looking into a mirror – the 'reflexion' of the outside is limited by the frame (of the mirror/mask), urging the wearer to start reconstructing the incomplete image. This effect does not transpire in case of masks (or make-up, such as worn by sports fans) which do not impede the vision in any way; in such cases, one primarily limits the access of the 'outside' to the 'inside' (identity anonymisation), simultaneously keeping complete (visual) autonomy. This entices the ecstatic transgression of social norms rather than any form of enstatic, inward-oriented and autonomy-impeding dynamic. The mirroring effect of the *Laarven* is also strengthened by the fact that the individual is surrounded

Figure 14. Waggis in the 50s are already a little larger than a human face, nose is bigger. Exhibition in the Ortsmuseum Binningen 'Basler Künstler-Larven 1925–1984'. Source: Foto Werner Kern.

by identical images of 'him/herself' (identical *Massge*) of the other group members, yet simultaneously being aware that these are distinct entities, many of them friends, yet completely estranged. This aspect of the *Laarven* has been explored in detail in the already mentioned film *Beneath the Mask: Darkness*.

Laarve creates a meditative space through connection

Paradoxically, the ritual framework and the *Laarve* does not only create distance. There are elements or periods within the Fasnacht ritual which are supposed to counteract the strict ritual rules of the *Gässle* and enable the individuals to redefine the *Laarve* as a tool of highly individualised self-expression: 'I see it in front of me and I reflect on it, I feel it, I relate to it.'[35] For one, there is the phenomenon of the so-called Wild-Fasnacht groups which have started springing up during the second half of the twentieth century. In line with the argument in this text, it has been described in detail elsewhere (Cieslarová and Chlup, 2020) that the Wilde Fasnacht groups represent a modality of the 'liquid ritualizing' (Arfman, 2014) characteristic of modernity (Bauman, 2000; Beck et al., 2003). But even the 'orderly' groups have the possibility of choosing their own masks as an expression of individuality during the *Charivari* (see Picture 6),[36] that is, on *Mòòrgestraich* and on Tuesday (which is also a 'children's

Figure 15. Contemporary Waggis at Fasnacht 2012.
Source: Photograph by Adam Dědič.

day' with ritualists bringing their youngest in often craftily improvised masks and costumes). The *Laarve* that one chooses might reflect how the participant feels: 'The kind of *Laarve* you choose says something about you, it reveals a certain part of who you are. You choose according to your own taste, based on what you feel like wearing. When I choose Alti Dante, I realize that this old aunt is somewhere deep inside of me. Or when I choose Pierrot, it most likely means that I feel like bringing the tender and melancholic side of myself out to play.'[37] Even though we might argue that these moments are included primarily as contrastive mechanisms aiming to highlight the distancing effect of the *Laarve*, in either case, the effect is that the wearer becomes reflexively self-aware (either through connection or dissociation).

Sounds and movement

The specific way the *Laarve* is worn must also be contextualised with respect to the music and movement pattern of the cliques. Contemporary Fasnacht is the outcome of the merging during the nineteenth century of two traditions: Swabian-Alemannic carnivals, the transformations of which are still very much alive in the regions surrounding Basel (Wunderlin et al., 2005), and traditional Basel parades (*Musterungen*) performed by various city associations and guilds as a presentation of their preparedness to protect the

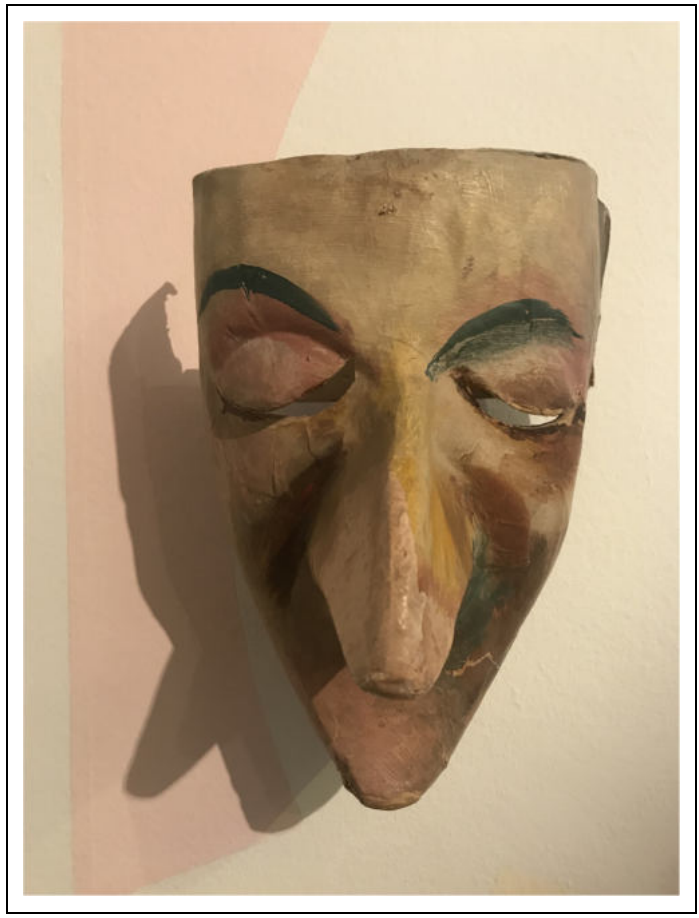

Figure 16. Alti Dante from 1929 (made by Atelier Adolf Tschudin), part of the collection of the Museum der Kulturen Basel, currently on display at the Fasnachtsausstellung (VI 11189).
Source: Author's photo archive.

respectively assigned portions of the city walls (Bürgi, 1998: 17). This origin infuses the marches with a very minimalist, militaristic rhythm and form. Even if the music gets a modern twist, for example, featuring more vocals and modern melodies, the military straightforwardness and monotony are retained. Melodies of the Napoleonic army, which passed through Basel in the early nineteenth century, can therefore still be heard today (Batschelet, 2011: 60). This results in the ritualists marching in unison, in ranks. The actual form of the *Laarve* and what it depicts then becomes irrelevant for the wearer: 'Of course we march to the music. Whether I'm wearing a Napoleon *Laarve*, or an Alti Dante *Laarve*, it makes no difference to the way I walk.'[38] This arrangement also strictly limits any form of communication between the groups and the spectators: for the group to maintain its formation, the ritualists must not get side-tracked by any interaction with their

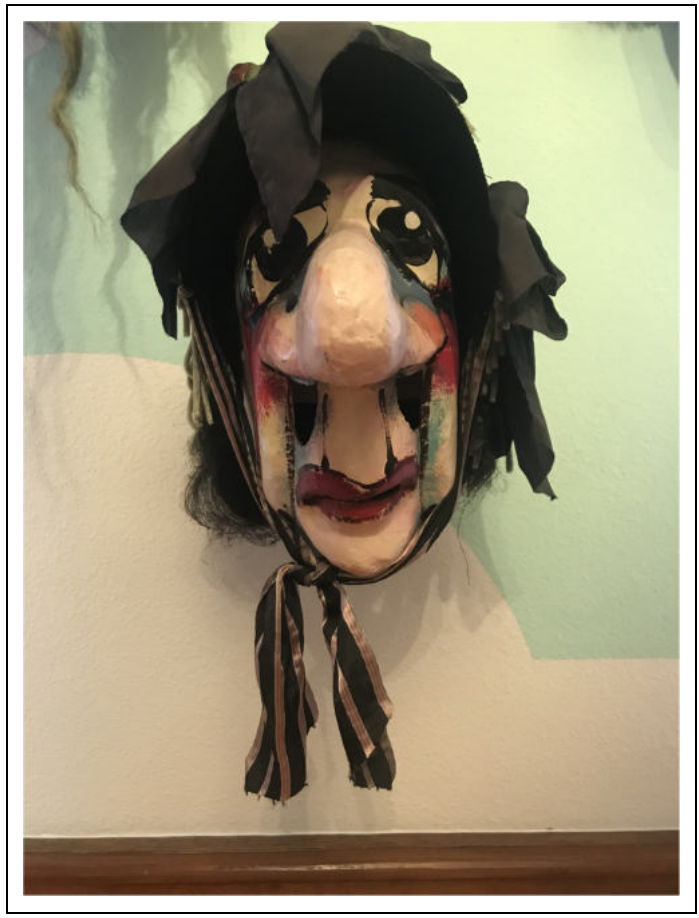

Figure 17. Alti Dante (alias De Gaulle) from 1968 (made in Atelier Adolf Tschudin, prototype by Ruedi Schmid, painting by Faustina Iseln), part of the collection of the Museum der Kulturen Basel, currently on display at the Fasnachtsausstellung (VI 37003).
Source: Author's photo archive.

surroundings.[39] In fact, the *Laarve* strictly limits their field of vision, forcing them to mechanically follow the tempo and direction set by the preceding members of the group led by the *tambourmajor*. Even though the streets are lined with thousands of onlookers gazing from the periphery at the groups in the centre of the street, ritualists have a sense of intense seclusion: 'everyone is alone with themselves.'[40]

Rhythmic donning and taking off the Laarve

However, the central *enstatic* mechanism seems to be the ritualised rhythm of donning and taking off the *Laarven*. The performative structure of the *Gässle* is composed of a sequence

Figure 18. Alti Dante today.
Source: Author's photo archive.

of marching and playing, and equally long periods of convivial repose. Each sequence lasts approximately 20–40 min, which corresponds to the comfortable performance time of piccolo players (intensive breathing).[41] During Fasnacht, many masked figures are out on the streets throughout the entire 72 h (with a few hours of sleep every night), during which the process of putting on and taking off the *Laarve* is repeated dozens of times by each ritualist. It seems that precisely this synchronized change between repetitive movement and static rest, between inwardly reflexive moments and socialising, can induce the ritualists into a certain kind of mental and physical attentiveness. This does not seem to be disrupted by the fact that during the breaks (which often take place outside or inside pubs), the people disperse, mingle and socialize. Quite the opposite: 'It is a delightful interplay of a "lonely" individual during *Gässle* and the breaks spent with the community which creates a sense of safeness. You feel the almost meditative immersion, indulging in your own thoughts while

walking through your own city. And then you can share this happiness with others.'[42] The ritual framework establishes a series of relatively quick sequences during which ritualists quickly change different frames and perspectives. We could say they are undergoing a form of 'symbolic hyperventilation': the satirized topic, which they are physically 'mirroring' to the city and the onlookers, is inhaled during the *enstatic* periods, to be then released, digested through social interaction (and a glass of beer), only to be inhaled again. It is a model of the symbolic processes within the society, condensed, visualized and personified. The donning and taking off the *Laarve* functions as a marker separating individual phases which, in real life, are happening simultaneously, unnoticed and in the background.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, we linked the development of the Basel Fasnacht *Laarven* to the specificities of the late-modern ('liquid') Western societies which stress individualised, reflexive and tailor-made experiences. The main argument of this essay is that the development of the Basel Fasnacht masks into *Laarven* during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a case study of just such a dynamic. The essay stops short of forming any generalising conclusions as to the relationship or dominance of enstatic over ecstatic dynamics in late-modern societies (or *vice versa*), as the chosen case study of the development of one specific ritual element within one specific ritual tradition is simply too specific an example as to make any wide-ranging assumptions. However, by thematising reflexivity as their organising principle even outside 'special' occasions (i.e. ritual/festive performances), 'post-traditional' societies must reinvent possibilities of 'reflecting on reflexivity'. The reason is that by 'reflexivity' becoming the central organising principle of late-modern societies (i.e. an established category), it paradoxically loses its reflexive capabilities. The reason is that reflexivity thrives on the boundaries of established categories, within a dynamic relationship – typically through difference, antithesis, incongruence and subversion. If one is socially required to be constantly reflective on their position within the symbolic system (as exemplified, e.g. by the plethora of available gender identities; constant urgings of the popular culture to 'find one's inner self/calling/one's true love', etc.), then reflexivity just becomes one of – albeit the most important – fixed categories, losing its liquid, relational and dynamic quality. However, as the need for liquid, reflexive instruments within systems does not disappear, this then leads not only to completely new and original forms of ritualising, but also to changes within established ritual frameworks – that is, 'reflecting on reflexivity'. To illustrate this argument, we chose to focus on an enstasis-inducing phenomenon of the *Laarven*, which stresses precisely this inward-oriented dynamic. However, a similar case-in-point (but in the other direction) could have been made in relation to the development of various forms of mass music gatherings (raves, concerts of all kinds) which, through their often-excessive use of mind-altering substances, induce similarly reflexive, yet directly opposite – ecstatic – states. We do not dare to claim that either of these dynamics is therefore more prevalent in late-modern societies. The case of the *Laarven* simply illustrates one specific example in one specific historical context, nothing less and nothing more.

Outside of the enstatic effect of the *Laarven*, as described above, there are other reflexive moments within the Fasnacht festivities we did not describe. These often utilize

paradox and cognitively dissonant elements to produce the necessary distance for reflexivity to potentially occur:

1. As elaborated elsewhere (Cieslarová and Chlup 2020), this is precisely the reason behind the development of the *Wilde Fasnacht* groups, which present a reflexive element to the ritual structure itself.
2. On the level of content, the cliques – like an actual *larva* of an insect – 'secrete' their understanding of the often very complex social dynamics relative to a specific topic (e.g. criticism of a specific politician, institutions, specific societal dynamics [burnout, globalisation, domestic violence], controversial building project in Basel, etc.) and transform them into a static image (outer shell) of a satirical *Sujet*. The topic itself is thus mirrored/reflected by the ritualists themselves, the audience, politicians and the society at large. The complex societal processes lurking underneath the *Sujet* are then intuited, just as an adult insect in its cocoon.
3. The contrast between the static mask and the dynamic movement of its bearer is another dissociative dynamic. In Fasnacht, it is a very unnatural movement, conditioned by the monotonous military-style tunes. It is mechanical, non-human almost, transforming the ritualists into automatons or a unit of soldiers dressed in carnival uniforms. This simultaneously degrades their individuality and strengthens group identity, yet also enables the highly individualised enstatic effect of the *Laarve* to transpire.
4. The emic term *Laarve* is an adaptation of the Latin term *larua*: 'horrific mask, demon, model skeleton' (Glare, 2012: 1104). The whole Fasnacht framework includes a latent netherworldly/mortuary element,[43] which was interestingly actualised during the COVID-19 anti-pandemic measures in 2020 and especially in 2021. As the masked procession of the cliques was forbidden, the masks and masked figurines were placed all over Basel – in house windows, on trams instead of passengers, seated at window-tables in closed restaurants instead of guests, displayed outside, hung on walls. Not only did these human simulacra eerily represent everything the society has lost to the pandemic (from individual human lives to various forms of social interaction), but they completely inverted the whole Fasnacht festive framework: on the day of the festival, the ritualists, without their masks, were aimlessly walking in small groups through Basel streets, being watched by the lifeless spectres of themselves. Public spaces, normally bustling with festive life, were deserted and populated by lifeless forms; elements from the centre (masks) moved to the periphery (spectators), transforming ritualists into the audience and *vice versa*; the otherwise observing (ritualists), devoid of their ritual objects (masks), were projecting themselves in the position of the observing. The ability of ritual frameworks to improvise and bite their own tail, to reflect upon their own reflective processes, seems to be inexhaustible.

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Notes

1. Ethnographic material for this paper was collected by O. Cieslarová between 2011 and 2022 (total of 76 weeks over 30 visits in Basel with 11 active Fasnacht participations). Interviews were conducted in Basel and Prague, through e-mail and various social media platforms. O. Cieslarová further assisted in the creation of a documentary film by Viola Ježková: *Beneath the Mask: Darkness* (premier 2018, Basel), one of the main themes of which is the experience of Fasnacht mask-wearing, featuring most of the respondents cited here (Ježková, 1998), including shots of masks at the *Museum der Kulturen* in Basel and documentary shots from Fasnacht. The film may be viewed online (English subtitles): www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlkprlY0O7s (accessed 15 March 2022). We would like to thank Werner Kern, who previously worked at *Larvenatelier Tschudin* in Basel and was as well involved in the *Museum Binningen*. He has accompanied us throughout the research, his suggestions and contributions make him a co-author of the whole study. For further help with texts, research and proofreading we would like to thank Marc Wey and Jürg Bürgi from Basel.
2. All Basel dialect terms are based on Suter (2006). Although a new dialect dictionary was published in 2010, the dialect is not fixed and most Fasnacht participants continue using the older 'Suter forms' for Fasnacht texts and expressions.
3. We would like to thank Jürgen Mohn (*Universität Basel*) for suggesting this idea.
4. For a concise overview, see (Aboulafia, 2020).
5. *Contra*, see (Adams, 2003; Alexander, 1996). It is important to state that we do not understand 'reflexivity' as a culturally neutral dynamic, as Giddens would have it, but rather as highly culturally conditioned, sometimes so specific as to making it difficult to identify, unless one is well versed in the workings of the given symbolic system. Telling signs of nascent/ongoing reflexive processes are various physiological expressions of humour, dread or ambivalent awkwardness.
6. Interview with Rudolf Brodbeck (Basel, 17 August 2011), piccolo player and *Obmaa* (head) of the *Duschuurli* clique. The participants often describe that they 'are critical, but our criticism remains within the borders of Fasnacht.' (Interview with Werner Kern, Prague, 16 November 2017). However, the impact of Fasnacht can be observed directly on the collective level. For example, being satirised/ridiculed is a badge of political honour (and good PR).
7. For example, as we have seen in case of the highly inventive forms of the ritualisation of the French Revolution, see (Jannarone, 2017).
8. This 'rebounding' principle has been described in extenso by Bloch in relation to (ritualised) violence (Bloch, 1992).

9. For an excellent overview of the historical development of European carnival forms, their constitutive elements with an appreciation of relevant literature and the various interpretative positions, see (Testa 2021).
10. To get an immersive chair-experience, we recommend that the reader watch the 2015 film *The Walk* directed by R. Zemeckis, which dramatizes the famous and illegal walk (7 August 1974) of Philippe Petit between the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York. In fact, the reaction of the authorities towards his feat as depicted in the film (especially of the policemen who arrive at the scene) is very much illustrative of the traditional handling of carnivals by (religious) authorities in (medieval) Europe – formally forbidden and decried, but simultaneously respected, tolerated and extolled even.
11. For a Western perspective, see (Melchior-Bonnet, 2001); a classic study with several most interesting examples of ritual usage of mirrors from African contexts, see (Fernandez, 1980).
12. There are numerous publications about Fasnacht and its history, usually published during anniversaries of the different groups (Christen, 1984; Gegenbach, 2001; Roth, 2013), or by the body of the official organizers, the Fasnachts-Comité (Meier, 1985; et al.) or at other occasions (Trachsler, 2004; Blum, 1999). Newspaper essays are also a rich source of information as well as memoirs, internal bulletins and magazines published by cliques and many texts in prose and verse. These studies and records come with few exceptions from Baslers who participate in Fasnacht.
13. Though the timing of Fasnacht during the period of Lent was often seen as a sign of provocation from Protestants towards Catholics, the origins of the delayed starting date vastly precede the Reformation. Up until the Council of Benevento (1091), Lent lasted for 40 days in a row. However, the council excluded Sundays from this period, thereby turning the 40-day fast into a 46-day fast. Therefore, in most Christian regions, Lent begins on Wednesday (Ash Wednesday). Basel used to follow the older system, which is why Lent started on the Monday following Ash Wednesday.
14. For more details on this fascinating phenomenon, see Cieslarová and Chlup (2020).
15. Treatises on masks tend to be dispersed in the above-mentioned publications (see above, n. 12), or in specialized articles (Wunderlin, 2005). Academic papers written by non-Baslers are very rare (Cieslarová and Chlup, 2020; Dudziek, 2005; Gold, 1982; Tokofsky, 2004). Important sources for studying masks are local museum collections, the permanent exhibition 'Basler Fasnacht' at *Museum der Kulturen* in Basel (https://www.mkb.ch/de/ausstellungen/2014/basler-fasnacht.html, accessed 20 March 2022, originally curated by Dominik Wunderlin) and the 'Basler Künstler-Larven 1925–1984' in *Ortsmuseum Binningen* (www.ortsmuseum-binningen.ch/larvensammlung.htm, accessed 20 March 2022).
16. For an overview and appreciation of relevant literature, see Testa (2021: 24–30).
17. Interview with Dominik Wunderlin (Basel, 1 October 2015).
18. Masks from this period – created using different materials – can be seen at the Basler Fasnacht exhibition in the above-mentioned *Museum der Kulturen Basel* and in *Ortsmusem Binningen*.
19. Artists started being more involved primarily following the end of the Second World War. *Basler Kunstverein* funded the involvement of artists in Fasnacht to weather the post-war financial crisis (Schweizer-Völker, 2002: 300) and the cooperation and mutual influence of Fasnacht and artists is still evident today (Blechschmidt, 2009: 56).
20. In texts about Fasnacht, a distinction is sometimes used between the *Gesichtsmaske* (facemask) and the Basler *Künstlerlarve* (see Gartner, 1985: 233–236; Vogt, 2003: 58–60).
21. The term *Gupf* or *Güpfli* is also often used.
22. Interview with Werner Kern (Basel, 5 October 2015).
23. One of the Fasnacht stock-characters (others include: *Alti Dante* [Old Aunt], *Pierrot* and *Harlequin* [adopted from *commedia dell'Arte*]) representing a caricature of the 'coarse

Alsatian French-speaking rustics' who historically came to Basel to sell their produce to the 'refined and German-speaking urbanites'. Even though the Basel Fasnacht ritualists themselves tend to restrain and diminish this *Waggis* symbolism (it feels rather outdated as it defies the spirit of liberal, inclusive society), their look (phallic-like protruding noses) and the ritual roles they are assigned in different parts of the festival (they 'aggressively' attack the onlookers by throwing their 'produce' into the crowd) obviously represent strongly sexualized elements best understood through the Bachtinian perspective of the *carnivalesque* as primarily a relaxation of social norms and violation of limits.

24. This concerns especially the *tambourmajors*, the lead drummers who set the tempo. Their *Laarven* are so huge that they must carry them as a construction on their shoulders with the eyeholes cut into the neck of the figure.
25. E-mail correspondence with Marc Wey (25 March 2022), whom we would like to sincerely thank for all his insights and feedback.
26. Interview with Werner Kern (Basel, 30 September 2016).
27. The central part of the ritual when groups walk around and play in the Basel streets, *Gässe* in German.
28. Interview with Werner Kern (Basel, 5 September 2015).
29. Interview with Bernhard (Beery) Batschelet (Basel, 4 October 2015; †2020), composer and professional flutist, participated with various wild groups (*Kuttlebutzer*, later *Gueti Fraue*).
30. Interview with Kevin Klapka (Basel, 10 May 2017), professional flutist, participates with the *Naarebaschi* clique, or alone.
31. E-mail interview with Magnus Roth (30 November 2019), graphic designer and lantern-painter (*Opti-Mischte* clique), member of their *Vòòrdraab* (marching with the vanguard, no instruments).
32. Interview with Michael Luisier (Basel, 2 October 2015).
33. Interview with Marc Wey (Prague, 30 June 2018).
34. Interview with Michael Luisier (Basel, 2 October 2015), theatre director and journalist (Swiss radio station SRF), author and editor of many radio programs on Fasnacht and satire.
35. The word *Charivari* was used to describe medieval folk parades. In the context of Basler Fasnacht, *Charivari* refers to the ritual phase during which one can wear costumes and *Laarven* based on their personal choice.
36. Interview with Doris Erni (Basel, 8 August 2011), retired teacher, piccolo player in the *Lyymsieder* wild group.
37. Interview with Marc Wey (Prague, 15 May 2017), retired diplomat, drummer in the *Frauenhilfswerk 1833* wild group.
38. Exceptions prove the rule. In the past, certain characters (especially the *Waggis*) engaged in peppery satirical dialogue (*intrigiere*) with spectators sitting in restaurants or standing in the street. However, this art gradually disappeared as Basel lost its small-town character and became more cosmopolitan and anonymised. We thank Alexander Sarasin to remember us not to forget this special use of masks. Nevertheless, the *Waggis*, who ride in wagons during the *Cortège*, shout, and give people fruit, vegetables and small items (see above, n. 23). Some masks in cliques also interact with passers-by as part of the displayed theme.
39. Interview with Caroline Rassel, theatre director (Basel, 8 May 2017).
40. Even though drummers alone can play for a longer time, most groups are mixed. Occasionally, however, the group lets the piccolo players rest and continues marching accompanied only by drums.
41. E-mail interview with Magnus Roth (30 November 2019).
42. To be developed elsewhere.

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Werner Kern has been active all his life in the Fasnacht in the Clique Basler Bebbi Basel, he was Tambourmajor (main drummer) and painter of lanterns. Kern previously worked at Larvenatelier Tschudin in Basel and was as well involved in the Ortsmuseum Binningen.