

Apr 7th, 4:00 PM - 4:50 PM

Capes, Corsets, Carnivals, and Chronotopes

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Drew, Nicole, "Capes, Corsets, Carnivals, and Chronotopes" (2018). *Ray Browne Conference on Cultural and Critical Studies*. 5.

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Capes, Corsets, Carnivals, and Chronotopes:

The Framework of a Convention

Cosplay and Convention Frameworks

Freshman year of college, I had claimed the communal lounge space as my own as I spread swaths of fabric across the floor and smoothed out as many wrinkles as possible. I had purchased the Simplicity pattern recommended by the blog post I read as well as the recommended fabric and accoutrements, but I had no idea where to start. The pattern was printed on a weird brown paper, folded too many times, hiding a secret code I never really ended up deciphering. I googled the meaning of “interfacing” and watched other people in YouTube videos lay out their patterns and cut fabric. It was the week before Katsucon, the anime convention in National Harbor, Maryland that my sister and I have been attending since 2012, and that year, 2013, I was determined that we join the majority of congoers and actually make our own cosplay. Except, I had never used a needle and thread before, so I had to teach myself via google searches and instructional videos. We ended up finishing the costumes in our hotel room the day we wanted to wear them, but we fell in love and have cosplayed every year since, usually with new costumes to premiere. Our social frameworks shifted, and our perception of reality changed – going to a convention and not cosplaying didn’t seem like the proper way of doing it anymore.

Goffman describes two primary frameworks by which we interpret events: natural and social. Natural frameworks are those that identify occurrences not willfully caused or guided. Different are social frameworks, which help us understand events driven by people, whose actions are dubbed “guided doings” (22). Everyone in some capacity operates under a collection

of social frameworks, because we are always “doing.” Our doing was choosing to cosplay and continuing to choose to cosplay. My sister and I added a social framework of cosplay to the frames we already had.

There are two parts within that social framework of guided doings: a physical and a social (Goffman 23-24). To use cosplay as an example, the physical aspect includes the making and wearing of the costume. The social, then, includes deciding what character to emulate and the interactions with others in the convention space, as well as determining which fabric provides the best look and whether or not following the pattern is absolutely necessary.

Goffman also writes of the ability of doers “to gear into the ongoing natural world and exploit its determinancy, providing only that natural design is respected” and that the doer will have to forever be conscious of the constraints of natural order, because that person, in order to effectively accomplish what one sets out to do, will always be operating inside of it (23).

Cosplay, as a social framework, also involves many rules, as Goffman insists it must (24). Some of these rules are the same ones we operate under in our daily lives: be polite and kind, respects others’ boundaries, etc. However, there are a few that are considered especially rude when part of the cosplay framework. A few examples: Always ask to take a person’s photo—they probably have a specific pose they know best shows off their cosplay; along the same vein, do not take someone’s photo if they’re relaxing, sitting, chatting with friends or eating—no one’s posture or clothing looks best this way, and it’s disrespectful; also, do not make negative comments about anyone’s cosplay because it’s just rude. Someone has taken pictures of me without asking. Another person took a photo while I was sitting, hunched over because my neck and shoulders were sore, and I guarantee it didn’t turn out well. I have also had someone pick at a cosplay I’ve worked very hard on. These people have broken those rules, and proven

themselves not up to the standards Goffman describes, especially those of tactfulness and good taste (22).

If social frameworks are applied in response to an event (Goffman 24), then it's easily argued that what cosplay is responding to is the convention. A group full of smaller groups of fans of all kind gathers in one location. The social response of cosplay comes to be in order to identify other fans, and perhaps to show off skills and nerd credentials. Social framework houses the person's agency, and that person's doing is always guided and must exist within the natural framework in some capacity. Conventions are one social framework, in which cosplay is another. Within cosplay, as with other frameworks, there are skills and abilities one has to master.

Mastering those skills requires practice – starting at the bottom and learning from there. Goffman describes practice as developmental: “the first step attempted is often easier and simpler...whereas the last practice session before he goes forth is likely to involve a higher concentration of varied difficulties and emergencies,” and, boy, is he right (64). When I started sewing, I didn't know how to do a backstitch. Upon learning the backstitch, I was able to sew the costumes of the main characters of *Frozen*, Anna and Elsa, for my sister and I, though they were shoddily stitched and barely even fit us. The following year, I learned how to make a breastplate out of craftfoam for the character Fenris from *Dragon Age*, though the sword and gauntlets began to fall apart only a few hours in. The next project was a little bit more adventurous. I created a costume after the character Red Robin in DC Comics. I made a moderately short skirt and a sleeveless top in the character's colors, as well as a cape meant to emulate the same texture as the one in the comic, which essentially means that I sewed dozens of individual strips of red fabric onto black fabric. It was pretty fun, and recognizable enough. Cold, though. The year after that, instead of learning something new, I practiced the skills I've been attempting to hone, and

put together a comic-accurate Robin costume, this one from DC Comics as well; this version of Robin was Tim Drake, but as Batman's third iteration of the sidekick and the first to wear pants. That costume didn't have too many kinks to work out, though the amount of wear I put on it requires the reattachment of the clasp on the cape. This past year, I managed to create something I'm very proud of. I took inspiration again from Tim Drake, but this time his second costume. Out of the color scheme and symbolism, I made a ball gown. It was my most adventurous project yet, and the first I've done without a pattern. It was mostly trial and error; the clasp on the skirt keeps needing repaired because the material is too heavy, and I need to secure it better, and the hem only barely covers the hoop skirt in some areas because of misjudged length. But Goffman is correct – the more I practice, the more I learn, the more complicated and difficult and dangerous it becomes (I refused to attempt escalators). It does pay off, though, because the congoers love it almost as much as I do.

The bystander is not merely a bystander, not for Goffman and not for Bakhtin. Both include the bystander in the witnessed event. Bakhtin seems to think this is because the carnival is inclusive; it cannot be witnessed from the outside, but rather must be experienced: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (198). Goffman, too, claims that the framework almost absorbs the bystander into participation, even if it wasn't their initial intention: "It seems that we can hardly glance at anything without applying a primary framework, thereby forming conjectures as to what occurred before and expectations of what is likely to happen now" (38).

Goffman's concept of keys and keying seems to apply well to carnival humor. The idea that we "transform serious, real action into something playful" (41). Keys are those set practices that already have meaning via a primary framework; when these keys are transformed into

something similar but interpreted differently, this is keying (44). Keying is actually quite relevant to carnival – for example, the serious rituals of crowning a king and queen are recreated, but it’s more a mockery, a play on those rituals. Cosplay, as well, is a type of keying. A transformation of fiction into reality, a transformation of “threat” into play – such as the Joker “threatening” my Robin, which I will elaborate more on later in the essay. Cosplay falls easily into the category of keys of make-believe:

By this term I mean to refer to activity that participants treat as an avowed, ostensible imitation or running through of less transformed activity, this being done with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing. The “reason” for engaging in such fantasies is said to come from the immediate satisfaction that the doing offers. A “pastime” or “entertainment” is provided. Typically participants might be expected to be free of pressing needs before so indulging themselves and to abandon those enjoyments unceremoniously should basic needs or urges become acute—a dour philosophy not particularly borne out by animal experimentation. Further, the engrossment of the participants in the dramatic discourse of the activity—the innermost plane of being—is required, else the whole enterprise falls flat and becomes unstable. Finally, when an individual signals that what he is about to do is make-believe and “only” fun, this definition tends to take precedence...he obliges them to accept his act as something not to be taken at face value (48).

This is very much how cosplay is treated, and is mostly how it is put into practice. Those few who have managed to make it a career, however, suffer from its aspects of make-believe, but also still fall within its parameters. It’s playful, which is central to this key (48).

Within this play as well as in framing itself, Goffman sets limits and establishes the way frames are able to change. “It might be added that most of these changes have been sufficiently slow and separate, one from another, so that during any one occasion participants could feel that a particular frame prevailed and would be sustained” (54). The prevailing theme is normalcy, which is why the convention framework is limited to its chronotope.

The chronotope as a natural framework puts a boundary around the convention, which I will discuss in depth later in this paper. In a role similar to that of stunt shows and circuses, the carnivalesque convention helps people figure out the what “ordering and limits of their basic frameworks are” (Goffman 31). Because their frameworks do not include the convention, these people know what they do include as well as the limits of what they will put up with. As with “astounding complexes” (Goffman 28), the general populace not a part of the convention framework expects the natural order to return, because if conventions and cosplay were permanent, they would have to shift and alter their set of frameworks – it is possibly one of the reasons for cognitive dissonance. The carnival nature, as well, requires boundary of time and space, for the same reasons.

The Convention as a Modern Carnival

For the drive to Katsucon, my sister and I will either get dressed before we get on the road, or we’re eager to get the hotel to get changed. As soon as we get close enough to the convention, however, we’ve already put the drive behind us. As we cross the bridge over the harbor, we start checking the cars around us to see wig heads, prop swords, and costumed passengers. Rounding the corner to the downtown harbor area, trying to figure out the traffic patterns that get us turned around consistently every year, we get our first glimpse of the event: A couple strolls down the street dressed as Link and Zelda, from the *Legend of Zelda* game

franchise. Upon entering the hotel, we pass other congoers dragging their own luggage dressed as characters from video games, comic books, podcasts, Broadway musicals, television shows, books, movies...the carnival has begun.

Conventions, both anime and comic themed, are a modern carnival as Bakhtin describes it. The carnival is a time set apart from normal day to day living. It is the opposite of everything hierarchical and regimented, and its temporary nature allows for a “suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (199). Bakhtin writes of the manifestations of the folk culture of carnivals. These are the ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various genres of billingsgate (196), as well as a “carnival atmosphere” provided by marketplaces and amusements, “imbued with...freedom, frankness, and familiarity” (213). In order for the carnival to be realized, it requires the fulfillment of each of these pieces of folk culture, and each of those helps to build the sense of a new and other place.

The con floor is the modern marketplace of these carnivals, which hosts the “folk festivities.” There is eating, there is interaction, there is activity. The convention center itself houses several restaurants, and the surrounding city blocks boast many more. There are entire rooms devoted to buying merchandise, whether it be officially licensed from the Dealer’s Room or an art print or button from the Artist’s Alley. I walk the floor of Katsucon in my cosplay; that year is the year of the Tim Drake comics-Robin costume. I hear yelling from around the corner as people cosplaying from the same text find each other and demand photos. I spot someone cosplaying Spiderman climb a decorative tree as a professional photographer crouches for the best angle. Standing in line for coffee and pastries, I watch a Ring Wraith from The Lord of the Rings hurry by riding a fake horse, and following him is a man dressed in black clapping together two coconut halves in order to simulate the sound of galloping hooves. Later that day, I

spot a group of people cosplaying several versions of Robin who spot my own Robin costume and accurately call out the name of the character. We take a brief second to revel in our shared passions before we go our separate ways. We even elect false kings and queens – those cosplay “celebrities,” invited as guests to the convention.

Bakhtin reiterates a few times the idea of a “second world and second life...during a given time of the year” (197), and those of us attending the convention are able to live in this created world as different people, but only for the weekend. The congoers eat, drink, party, and rely on the entertainment of the spectacles to create this other world. One of these ritual spectacles of the convention is the masquerade. At Katsucon, on Saturday, crowds of cosplayers gather in the main show room to spend a couple hours watching groups perform skits, created as a full performance with proper lighting and audio, as well as observing walk-ons, those cosplayers who merely stroll across the stage in order to flaunt their craftsmanship. At the end of the show, the panel of judges gives out prizes and awards. Many skits are comical and awkward, meant more for fun and less for competition. However, many are as impressive as they are fun. My sister and I are thrilled as the character onstage reenacts his entire journey as the hero of the *Kingdom Hearts* games, right down to the resting animations and iconic music. Several women dressed as various Disney princesses, queens, and leading ladies walk onstage to the tune of “When You Wish Upon a Star,” pose, and walk off. They are replaced a few moments later as a guy in a very large, very bulky, very carefully crafted Bumblebee construction makes his way to center. He looks incredibly like the *Transformer* robot, right down to the car door wings. The costume is at least ten feet tall, aided by stilts inside the legs, and the rest is proportionate. He stands still for a few moments before a fast-paced song begins playing over the speakers and the

lights change to match the beat, and suddenly this man in this huge construct starts dancing. It's as amazing as it is ridiculous.

Ridiculous, as well, is another of my favorite aspects of cosplay, which ties well with Bakhtin's concept of comic compositions, specifically the textual parody. It's not too unusual to find a clever parody of a character. At Katsucon 2017, one of my favorite characters from the video game *Overwatch*, Soldier: 76, was a popular choice of cosplay. Two versions really stand out, however. The first is a play on the fandom's interpretation of the character as the "dad" of the cast of the game. The cosplayer wore the character's iconic face mask, but wore a plaid robe, pajama pants, and held in one hand a mug that said "World's Okayest Dad" and in the other a sign reading, "Hey you punks, get off my lawn!" which is one of Soldier's in-game voice lines. The second version took its cues from Sailor Moon's outfit. The man was average height, muscular, wore the previously mentioned face mask, and a costume similar to the one Sailor Moon wears, with a leotard, short skirt, collar and bow, and heeled boots. This isn't a reimagining of the character, but rather a parody, which is one of the forms of humorous folk culture.

That same convention, I participated in a group photoshoot of DC cosplayers dressed, as mentioned previously, as the third Robin. As I waited in the dim lighting surrounded by Harley Quinns and Supermans and even one person dressed as Lobo, I ended up standing next to a man cosplaying the Joker. I accidentally made eye contact with this Joker, who smiled at me (exaggerated by the character's iconic makeup) and started making jokes and references to the "dead bird that came before." In the comics, the Joker kills Tim Drake's predecessor, Jason Todd. Bakhtin talks of abusive language used affectionately and mutual mockery being permitted as part of a "carnival familiarity" (203). This event, mentioned previously in relation to

a key in the framework, is the “play” aspect of the term “cosplay” in full effect, and I argue that this falls into the category of billingsgate that Bakhtin requires in a carnival space.

Another version of billingsgate occurs under this carnival familiarity. The carnival, in this case the convention, creates a space where people are on equal standing and everyone can address each other with a level of familiarity they maybe wouldn't otherwise. When I attended New York Comic Con, I wore a costume of my own original design; it was a ball gown based on Tim Drake's second comic costume. I was buying a protein bar from one of the little convenience stores set up in the convention center when I noticed a woman in a deep navy blue formal gown holding a bedazzled Captain America shield. As I strolled over to ask for a picture, trading the snack in my hand for my cellphone, she noticed my gown as well. We were strangers, but we shared a few moments of familiarity as we each took turns fawning over the other's concept. We were able to talk with each other about our methods and our struggles, which outsiders may not understand in quite the same way. This is an important aspect of the carnival.

Grotesque realism, which also occurs during carnival, according to Bakhtin exists to “bring a subject down to earth” and “turn it to flesh” (206). Cosplay creates something tangible out of something fictional, takes the subjects of popular culture and exaggerates it in order to make it exist in a way that might be unexpected but is always real. There seems to be more scholarship that can be done, especially involving horror cosplay, but I won't be examining it here. However, this too can only comfortably exist within either a convention space or possibly during Halloween.

Bakhtin also writes about the concept of sacrilege, the mocking of deities, being another integral part of the carnival (197). A very popular cosplay at Katsucon is that of Jesus, which makes some congoers uncomfortable but creates a humor response in others. The weekend isn't

complete until my sister and I have shared an elevator ride with Jesus. Superheroes are also very popular cosplays, which exists as another type of play on the deity, both as god-like figures and as characters to play with. The carnival exists in opposition to the social order, in so far as it doesn't completely destroy morals. This allows for a rebellion against the seriousness of religion and politics. This allows a person to wear a Bernie Sanders mask with their Sailor Moon costume—Sailor Moon has a very versatile wardrobe—in order to garner the comic laughter Bakhtin notes as being part of the carnival as well.

Bakhtin's description of the clowns and fools of carnival is fascinating and applicable. He writes, "they were not actors playing their parts on a stage...but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance" (198). Replace "clowns and fools" with "cosplayers," who fall into their role easily, convention to convention, because we never stop being a cosplayer. We're always thinking, planning, and prepping for the convention, ready to continue a life that's merely paused when the con isn't happening. We tend to plan our lives around conventions, instead of the other way around, seeking the time and place where we get to distance ourselves from the real world for a bit, though we never get too far from Goffman's assigned playfulness.

The Chronotope of a Convention

During Katsucon 2016, the boundary around the convention space became a little strained. This was the year of the short skirt Red Robin costume, and, as the convention takes place in February, I spent my time inside the building. My sister, as well, stayed inside, as she wore loose pants and a bralette as a feminine take on the character Iron Bull from *Dragon Age*. Partway into the second and busiest day of the convention, Saturday, the fire alarm goes off. Everyone pauses for a moment, but nothing seems to be happening, so we collectively decide not

to act. It didn't last, however, as staff began to herd the crowds toward the doors for evacuation, but no one wanted to go outside. It was mostly because of the cold, but it's almost as if the boundary was straining against this mass exodus. We passed various venues packed with cosplayers, with more trying to fit into the warmth. My sister and I, along with our friends, ended up huddled inside of the lobby of one of the parking garages. The mass re-entrance was met with palpable relief from the little harborside city, which was never prepared for the boundary to be so loose.

Bakhtin uses the term "chronotope" to mean "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (184). I'm taking it out of literature, because it can be applied easily to conventions, and therefore carnivals as well, with only a little alteration. The connections between the relationships of space and time exist just as artistically when applied to conventions as they do when applied to literature. About the carnival, Bakhtin states that it "is always essentially related to time" (198). During the time of the convention, in the space of the convention, people gather together in costumes that they have carefully created. Artistically expressed, occurring in a specific place, at a specific time, to create something unique and readily identified – the chronotope of a convention.

Bakhtin describes space and time the way they exist as chronotopes. "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible..." (184). Crowds of costumed individuals exist in the convention, seen only for this short period of time. "...space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time" (184). The woman at the front desk of the hotel in Jersey City spots the garment bag and wig head I'm carrying and eagerly asks, "Are you guys going to Comic Con?" The actual convention center is more than an hour away by subway, but the spatial relations echo even that far. "The chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take

on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins.... Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation” (187). This center is the chronotope, and the chronotope is the convention. The narrative center is the convention center, and cosplay exists in relation to it. The immediate areas surrounding the convention center, such as shops and restaurants within walking distance, can also be within the chronotope, but there is a distinct boundary.

Cosplay can only exist comfortably in this specific chronotope. While the woman at the front desk of our hotel for New York Comic Con had a very positive attitude towards our attending the convention, I didn't wear my Robin gown in the city – I packed it into a bag and carried it with me. I got mostly ready in the hotel room; I put on the makeup and wig and wore the corset portion under my t-shirt. It was hot and uncomfortable on the subway, but I'd rather that than wear the full skirt. Just the thought of it made me uncomfortable, because I was acutely aware of how out of place a costume would be outside of the central convention space. Nicola Kirkam states in her essay on resort chronotopes that “social activities and representations of those activities presume different kinds of space and time” (72). What this means in terms of the convention is that the activities inside of the convention space can only occur within that space. The outside world is not part of the chronotope. The gown does not and cannot belong in the city.

Kirkam's quote also means that the carnival rituals would also not be able to take place outside of the convention space-time. The comic composition of Sailor: 76 would be seen as a perversion, and if someone dressed and acted like the Joker in their workplace, it would at the very least be frowned upon. And I know I do not address strangers on a regular basis. None of these activities have any proper place or time except for that of the convention.

As a cosplayer, conventions always feel a little bit off-kilter if I'm spending a day or even a few hours out of costume, especially if the costume has had a good reception. My gown was very successful at New York Comic Con, especially by my own personal standards. I was frequently stopped for photos by congoers. Some loved my take on the Robin costume, others just loved the gown as a construction. As I heft the hoop skirt up to navigate the Dealer's Room portion of the convention floor without tripping, I pass dozens of people. Most are browsing the hundreds of items for sale, but every so often I can't help but smile as I hear a small gasp and a "look at that gown, it's gorgeous," followed by, "Oh! She's Robin!"

The chronotope of the convention, the creation of this second world, allows me a space in which I can take pride in the work I've done that I don't necessarily advertise in the outside world. When my coworkers at home found out I cosplayed, I was concerned that they would look at me differently because it does not have a place outside of the convention. It turned out fine, because they were impressed that I knew how to sew, and they were very kind and supportive of my projects.

More than the attention and gratification of the attention of others, however, it feels more like I'm wasting the time of the convention if I'm not using it to cosplay, because the only place and time I can actually do it is the convention. I take the time and make the effort to put together my costume, as do all other cosplayers, and we know that we have this specific time to show them off, just as the medieval citizens Bakhtin discusses know they only have the time of the carnival in which to let off steam, shout at their lords, and drink too much.

What about the cosplay that happens outside of the convention? Cosplay music videos (CMVs), YouTube cosplay skits, and photoshoots are the three major examples. Cosplay music videos are usually comprised of footage of cosplays at a convention edited and set to music.

They are a way to revisit that convention space. Photoshoots are similar; wearing the costume and staging photos echoes the same convention space. Even YouTube cosplay skits, like those done by the group NyxRising Industries, is an extension of the carnival play, the comic performances that belong in the con chronotope. Because the convention, like the carnival, exists on the border between art and life, and is, as Bakhtin states, “life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play” (198), these forms of cosplay that exist outside of the convention space and time are still a part of the chronotope. I believe these are merely extensions of the chronotope, small bubbles of convention space-time that cosplayers can create for themselves in very small segments of time to hold onto when the time stretches too long between cons. They are able to exist online as part of the convention’s social framework, in an instance of what Goffman described as a pushing against the natural order.

Conventions are resplendent with drinking, eating, and spectacle. They are carnival in nature, and that carnival belongs to a chronotope that creates a boundary around its space and time. Cosplay exists within this boundary, and cannot easily or comfortably exist outside of it. As my sister and I leave Katsucon, driving back over the bridge, into the snow and cold, we are no longer in costume. Our social framework of cosplay, however, helps us while away the time talking about our favorite moments, the best cosplays we’d seen, what projects we might want to start for next year; the convention has ended, and we begin our wait for the next one.

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