

Summary

The *point de départ* for my study *Elvis Presley - the carnivalistic King* is that Elvis Presley constitutes a carnival mask in the folkloristic sense. This means that Elvis Presley can be interpreted and decoded as a collective aggregate consisting of the most differing influences, sources of inspiration concerning this mask. I show that Elvis' mask is purely physical and includes the use of mascara, a special hair dye, hair style, special clothes, movements, gesticulations and poses and that Elvis' music can be read as a correspondence in sound to a visual mask. By carnival I mean a strategy or discourse that attempts to reject binary oppositions between high and low, human and divine, human and animal, feminine and masculine, etc. This is achieved by means of symbolic inversions, masks and other types of transgressions or playful behaviour.

I point to the strong trait of boundary crossing, liminality, which is the underlying conceptual figure behind the carnival discourse within which Elvis' mask is played. I also show how the mass media, by destroying and distorting Elvis' carnival mask, lock him into a set pattern, refusing to set him free. I also show that Elvis' mask in fact comprises four distinctly different masks, from four different phases of his career: 1. the early rock and roll mask (1954-1959), 2. the film mask (most of the 60's), 3. the renewed rock mask (1968-1970), 4. the grotesque Las Vegas mask (1970-1977).

I also maintain that Elvis' most significant crossing of boundaries concerns the boundary between black and white in the USA and that the sources of inspiration for Elvis' mask vary greatly and consist of both earlier and later Hollywood films, black hipster culture, science fiction and local hillbilly traditions, for example. All this is reflected musically in great variety: he enters and leaves practically all styles of American popular music.

I further discuss the relationship between his (tragic) fate and the mask, his personality in relationship to the mask and, briefly, his popularity today (and his emergence as a post-modern phenomenon in today's popular culture).

The principal hypothesis in my thesis is that Elvis created such a strong mask that it made more than just a rock idol and made possible what might be termed a Faustian pact, with fame as the reward, something that at the personal level, led to his fall.

The material for my study consists in the main of generally available texts (books, newspaper cuttings), records, videos, with and about Elvis. From the

enormous amount of material that exists about Elvis certain biographies in particular and the wide range of pictorial materials have proved important sources for my work. But also so-called trivial or scandalous literature about Elvis is included in my materials.

My method of analysing, i.e. of interpreting and decoding these texts and pictures, consists of a semiotically and anthropologically inspired cultural analysis within a folkloristic framework. By a detailed study of the Elvis mask I try to liberate the content and significance of the mask, seen against the background of American general and popular culture. Special emphasis in this interpretation is laid on relating the mask to Elvis' own white, poor southern-state background and to the black culture he was influenced by but I also try to relate it to American popular culture in general.

Concerning the folkloristic approach in my work I try to establish a critical reading of certain standard folkloristic concepts such as tradition and the dichotomy between folk culture and mass culture. Further I direct my attention to a subject area in folkloristics that takes up fields that lie between somewhere between theoretical discourse and concrete reality, in the form of conceptual figures, also conceptual patterns for folk popular fantasising.

My approach where I apply a folkloristic concept - the carnivalistic mask - to a popular cultural phenomenon such as Elvis means that the discipline of folkloristics can be used as to analyse both modern and post-modern phenomena. By concentrating on the historical links and roots of the Elvis figure and mask I can as a folklorist, I hope, indicate the historical continuity that is to be found in a field such as rock music. A further advantage is that it is thereby possible to avoid a terminology that can easily become bewildering and insignificant (with concepts that are rather difficult to define such as myth, legend, ikon etc.).

My way of seeing Elvis as a socially constructed mask agrees well with the current view in the arts of reality as primarily a social and cultural construct. My approach might be termed a synthesis of folkloristic ideas (about masks and masking) with ideas from Mikhail Bakhtin (of carnivals and carnivality) and from symbolic anthropology (boundaries and boundary-crossing).

My thesis about Elvis Presley is, then, built upon an understanding of Elvis as a mask, i.e. a collective *personage*, a collective aggregate or a stereotype loaded with content from many different fields. This mask concept is based on the idea that the world is socially constructed, that we all play social roles, constitute persons. In this I follow the ideas put forward by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). It is in everyday real meetings with other people that the social role played by a

person takes form, it is here that the typification that we subject ourselves to occurs. According to Berger and Luckmann everyday reality is seen as a continuum of such typifications. The social structure is made up of the sum of these typifications and the interaction patterns that they give rise to.

In this sense we come close to the meaning of the Latin concept *persona*, in the meaning of role. The boundary between *person* and *persona* thus becomes fluid and concerns perhaps above all the degree of role play and the place for this role play. What distinguishes the mask from the *persona* is not only the degree but also the qualitative difference. As has been implied above, the mask (*personage*) constitutes a collective stereotype while the person concept, also *persona*, is an example of a predominantly individual role formation.

In my study of Elvis Presley I shall demonstrate that Elvis represents all three different types of roles: the private person Elvis Presley, the *persona* Elvis Presley - as he may said to be when he "plays himself" in film after film in the 60's - and, last but not least, the mask or *personage* Elvis Presley, which is the aspect that I wish to concentrate on in my thesis.

Elvis' mask, in my study, has all the main characteristics of a "real", or physical mask. It is not just a question of the fact that Elvis was influenced by many different phenomena from many different sectors, both real and inspired by fantasy. His mask is, to say the least, physically concrete, from the mascara, hair dye, hair style, sideburns to his dress, his way of moving, dancing, to small details such as the movement of one corner of the mouth or his little finger. I also study in detail the different expressions of the Elvis mask and try to put them in a relevant context - the carnivalistic context made up of the early rock and roll world and later Las Vegas show world.

In addition, I demonstrate that his singing - which was indubitably an important part of the Elvis Presley phenomenon, even if not as important as might *a priori* be thought - constitutes a kind of sound mask. This means that at the sound and music level the image of Elvis Presley is completed as a collectively stamped, strongly boundary and genre-crossing creation.

By working with this mask concept I shall be able to point to the many different historical roots that the Elvis Presley phenomenon is made up of - and in this cultural *bricolage* or *cut'n'mix* that constitutes Elvis - one can in this respect see an early correspondence to a cultural strategy that in the post-modern era (from the beginning of the 70's onwards) has been practically canonised.

The mask concept allows me to construct a pre-history for Elvis, a folkloristic link of the Elvis figure to earlier models in different fields. Paradoxically, Elvis thus becomes in a certain sense a traditional artist at the

same time as he can be seen as an early example of someone who applies what we would now call a post-modern cultural strategy. At least he is a figure who builds further on different traditional forms (even though he transforms these as, for example, the blues, boogie and country genres).

By seeing Elvis as a carnivalistic mask I shall also be able to avoid the type of descriptions of Elvis to be found in the popular press that are partly very common (and quite meaningless) but also those used in a *cultural studies*-oriented study such as Gilbert Rodman's book, namely the description of Elvis (and other American celebrities) as a myth or ikon. The content of these two concepts, myth and ikon, easily tends, in my opinion, to become very imprecise, a tendency that probably derives from the extremely broad meanings that these words have now acquired in general speech.

After giving a general introduction to the topic of my thesis in the first chapter - Elvis as a folkloristic object of study and Elvis as a carnivalistic mask - in the second chapter I then go on to describe the carnival and the carnivalistic on the basis of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories about the carnival as an inversion of binary opposites and give an account of a number of projects inspired by Bakhtin that develop these ideas further, e.g. V.V. Ivanov's semiotics-oriented carnival research and also the insights provided by symbolic anthropology into boundaries and the crossing of boundaries. Two relatively new applications of the carnivalistic concern the political discourse studied by the Englishmen Stallybrass and White and the feminist discourse studied by Natalie Zemon Davis and Mary Russo among others. Among the applications of Bakhtin's carnival theory to modern mass media I mention Robert Stramm's research into film and John Fiske's theories about the mass media.

From the general carnivalistic I then go on to rock music and the carnivalistic where my ideas are based above all on Ulf Lindberg's study *Rockens text* (1995) in which he puts forward a theory of the central symbols in rock music. Lindberg's theory is a synthesis of Bakhtin's, psychoanalytical and symbolic anthropological theories. According to Lindberg the most important symbols in rock music can be divided into sub-areas: 1. symbols of the original, 2. symbols of the low, vulgar, unclean, 3. symbols of that which crosses boundaries, of the evasive, ambivalent, 4. symbols of the raised, bombastic, exaggerated, 5. symbols of the new, indefinite, future, Utopian.

In chapter 3, which addresses the carnivalistic roots of rock music I analyse three historical roots that are of key importance for rock as carnivalistic discourse, namely 1. New Orleans music, 2. the *vaudeville/minstrel show* tradition, and 3. the *white hillbilly/comedy* tradition. My examination of these shows that all three musical and cultural roots have played an important role for

the type of explosive, carnivalistic, boundary-crossing music that rock has represented ever since the days of Elvis.

In the fourth chapter I discuss the research that has been done on rock music and the Elvis figure hitherto. A notable trait in early rock research was its strong sociological character. At the same time it emerged quite early that rock music also attracts disciplines that lie in a frontier country between social research and the arts. My own thesis may be seen as a confirmation of this tendency. It means that rock research in sociology, anthropology, ethnology and cultural studies constitutes an important part of rock research as a whole. What is particularly interesting is that purely musicological research plays such a subordinate role in rock research as a whole.

The fifth chapter describes the subject of my study, Elvis Presley, both his life and his career. The focus of this description lies partly on Elvis' background, partly on the rapid breakthrough of his career and the increasingly important significance of what might be called the tragic in his life, his dependence on other people and on drugs.

The key section of my thesis, the sixth chapter, which is also the longest, is a perusal of the key components of what I call the construction of Elvis, the king of rock. Using a semiotic decoding and interpretation model I try to identify the different meanings and patterns that can be found in what I describe, in an overall term, as Elvis' carnivalistic mask. I start with his hair style, which was a key part of the Elvis mask, proceed to his facial mask, his clothes (both stage and private clothes) and go on to analyse Elvis' use of colour. There then follows an analysis of Elvis' movements on stage, in films and also in private. I show that his exaggerated movements may also be grounded in the ecstatic mass movements of the American South and Mid-West. I also discuss his special gestures and poses and suggest that something that might be called a special "gesturology" of rock artists' gestures could be developed within the framework of rock research. Then, in the same chapter, I discuss the verbal expressions of the carnivalistic construction of Elvis, above all the special humour and his interest in practical jokes.

The seventh chapter takes up the question of Elvis' music, which I analyse on the basis of the American sociologist, Philipp H. Ennis' (1992), categorisation into seven different streams of music. I come to the conclusion a) that Elvis can be said to have direct links with all seven of these American streams of music and b) that he is, in the highest degree, a boundary-crosser of these streams of music. If we wish to point to the unique in Elvis' contribution in general, it is this musical diversity that is one of its notable characteristics. At the same time this musical boundary-crossing helps to explain some of the

complexity of Elvis' carnivalistic mask. I go through the seven streams of music and discuss Elvis' relationship to each of them by giving examples of how he enters into and departs from these streams. One of the most exciting characteristics is that he succeeds in creating what might be termed a fantasy stream of music. This eighth stream seems to be linked to Elvis' sense of escapism, fantasising, day dreaming and interest in the exotic.

Since my study of Elvis' carnivalistic mask(s) indicates that his rock'n'roll mask is that which the other masks are also built on as well as being that which gives him the status of king of rock, I examine, in chapter eight, his repertoire of rock music from 1954 (the start of his recording career) to 1959 (the rupture in this career/end of his rock career because of his military service). I also discuss the topics in his principal rock pieces, making a fairly detailed examination of "Hound Dog", "All Shook Up", "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Jailhouse Rock".

Since my study shows that the key boundary-crossing aspect of Elvis' mask consists of crossing the boundary between black and white in the USA, I devote a separate chapter to the question of Elvis' relationship to black culture. I try to identify Elvis' ambivalent position between the two extremes "white nigger" and "racist", two descriptions given to Elvis (see e.g. Guralnick 1994: 243 and Rodman 1996: 34ff). In this chapter I discuss the race problem in the US in more general terms.

The tenth chapter is devoted to a discussion of Elvis as a person and mask from a somewhat different perspective than the earlier one. I base my discussion on the accounts of what kind of person Elvis was that can be found in the literature about Elvis and from these I try to show how his mask is constructed. I also address Elvis' relations to his closest relatives, especially his mother Gladys and his father Vernon. The latter part of the chapter consists of an examination of the four different masks I have been able to distinguish in the Elvis material: 1. the early rock'n'roll mask, 2. what I call the film mask, 3. the second, revived rock mask, 4. the grotesque Las Vegas mask. I endeavour to reveal both the differences and the similarities between the four different masks.

Finally in this chapter, I take up Elvis' home, Graceland, as a staging and scenery for his mask(s). In the case of Graceland, too, I use a semiotic model to decode and interpret this motif. I discuss in somewhat more detail certain key rooms at Graceland on the basis of pictorial materials available in the mass media. Finally, I establish that Elvis becomes a prisoner of his mask, not least because of the extremely strong influence exerted over his "Elvis doll" by the "doll master", Elvis' manager Colonel Parker.

In the eleventh chapter I look particularly at the importance of the mass media in creating and maintaining the Elvis mask and point to the distinct differences between the modern Elvis mask and mediaeval and Renaissance masks. I identify the existence of both structural and sociological similarities between Elvis and popular southern preachers/gospel singers. This applies in particular to the locking of the mask in a certain direction which, because of the mass media, makes it difficult for the mask bearers to alter. Following this I briefly discuss different types of attitude towards Elvis (e.g. *fandom*, Elvis as a cult object and Elvis as an object of religious adoration).

In the same chapter I also discuss the Elvis mask in relation to some other well-known mass-media masks. Those masks that I use and analyse from a similar cultural and semiotic perspective to that used in my Elvis study are Charles Chaplin, Al Jolson, Rudolph Valentino, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Marlon Brando, Little Richard and Michael Jackson. I point out the structural likenesses that exist between these liminal or liminoid¹ mass-media masks and the masks used in transition rites in so-called primitive societies.

My *point de départ* is the anthropologist Victor Turner's theories about the liminal characteristics of those to be initiated in transition rites among the Ndembu people in Zambia (Turner 1967: 93ff). The difference between masks worn in the mass media and the Ndembu people's masks is, above all, a question of their permanence. While Ndembu masks last for a relatively short period of time the mass media lock their mask bearers into a situation of liminality for what is, in principle, the rest of their lives.

In the twelfth and concluding chapter I discuss Elvis' four masks, concentrating especially on the significance of the violations his masks actualise. I also take up the key question that I have touched upon only indirectly in preceding chapters, namely the question of whether Elvis himself consciously created his mask or whether it was a consequence of circumstances. I also point out that Elvis with his masks, especially the Las Vegas mask, proceeds more and more obviously from the real to the fantastic, which means that in the Elvis case his contact with reality becomes more and more tenuous. The carnival king glides increasingly into the position of an unambiguously imaginary or fantastically grotesque figure. Finally, I address briefly the so-called Elvis *look-alikes* that have emerged, especially following Elvis' death (as paraphrases of his fourth and last mask) and in general the whole phenomenon of *Elvis after Elvis*.

¹Concerning the differences between the closely related concepts liminal and liminoid see below 11.2