

Aesthetics and Archaization: Transformations in the Crafting and Sensory Impact of Romanian Carnival Masks

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ABSTRACT

The masks used in Romanian winter carnivals are becoming increasingly larger, more imposing, and more colourful. This evolution is driven by two key factors: the growing emphasis on visual aesthetic appeal and the need for masks to generate a powerful sensory impact that engages resonates with broader and more diverse audiences. These changes extend beyond the masks themselves to encompass the overall performance, incorporating larger groups of participants and soundscapes, thereby intensifying the sensory experience.

As part of this transformation, elements borrowed from various sources are deliberately reworked and exaggerated to heighten the impression of archaism, reinforcing the image of a genuine folk tradition whose apparent preservation of older forms is itself partly achieved through their reinvention.

These developments highlight the adaptive nature of ritual practices, where sensory and aesthetic elements play a crucial role in maintaining cultural relevance and sustaining ensuring the ritual's efficacy. By employing these strategies, such winter masquerades express and reinforce collective identities, power relations, and shared meanings within the community. By enhancing their sensory impact, masquerades not only appeal to contemporary sensibilities but also foster a sense of continuity, grounding the community in its cultural heritage.

Thus, ritual elements such as masks function not only as aesthetic artifacts but also as active agents in shaping and conveying identity, power, and collective meaning through evolving sensory strategies. By examining the case of *Uncheși* (lit. "uncles") masks of Păunești village in Vrancea County, this article explores how recent transformations of the masks and their performance reflect broader socio-cultural shifts, emphasizing the central role of sensory impact in preserving the ritual's efficacy and resonance in contemporary contexts. At the same time, it highlights the dialectical relationship between modern innovation and revival of tradition.

KEYWORDS

Heritagisation; Romanian winter masquerades; materiality; ritual masks; sensory experience.



INCEPUT



Ritual context and performative actions over time

Among the emblematic figures of the winter carnival are *moșii* [lit. "old men"] and *babele* [lit. "old women"], masked characters representing elderly men and women whose presence during this liminal period of temporal renewal signifies the continuity of the community and the balance between life and death. The custom of the *Uncheși*¹

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[lit. “uncles”] from Păunești, which forms the focus of the present analysis, belongs to the broader group of carnivalesque practices that take place in the Moldavian region during the New Year period. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, the ritual traditionally unfolded between the night of 31st of December and 1st of January, the feast day of Saint Basil. On this occasion, households where someone was celebrating their name day were visited by groups of masked performers, and these visits sometimes continued into the following day. Masked groups would also stop at the homes of performers’ fiancées, observing the strict rule that masks could not be removed until the ritual sequence had been completed. The visit to each household typically concluded with a shared meal, during which traditional foods and drinks were consumed.

Traditionally, the performers would move through the village using a cart drawn by animals and decorated for the occasion. Today, these carts have largely been replaced by motor vehicles pulling trailers, which are elaborately adorned with traditional blankets, tinsel, Christmas ornaments, coloured paper, and other festive decorations. From these mobile platforms, music is played, performers dance, and various comic scenes are enacted. These include playful performances such as parodies and other humorous sketches designed to provoke laughter, like mock weddings and mock funerals performances inspired by traditional ceremonial groups, which remain widespread today. These mobile performances resemble allegorical floats inspired by larger and more widely known carnivals or festival traditions.

The ritual documented in Păunești results, as in many other contexts, from the convergence of two distinct ritual practices that historically overlapped during the New Year festivities: the *Plugul* or *Plugușorul*² and the carnivalesque masked performance.

In this context, at each household they visit, the masked performers enact the *Plugușorul*, a rhythmic ritual text describing the successive stages of agricultural labour while simultaneously incorporating satirical commentary on recent actions, behaviours, and events involving villagers, local authorities, or politicians. Through irony, sometimes expressed in coarse or deliberately provocative language, the text alludes to recent events that have shaped and animated the life of the community. The recitation of the text is followed by the symbolic act of drawing a furrow in the host’s yard, re-enacting the agricultural gesture that lies at the heart of the New Year ritual marking the beginning of the agrarian year.

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Methodology

The present study draws on qualitative ethnographic research combining direct observation with semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the local community, as part of the research conducted in the *Unveiling the Arts and Crafts Behind the MASKS* project (101139852).

Informants were selected from different age groups and positions within the ritual, allowing the research to capture a range of perspectives on the custom and its contemporary transformations.

Particular attention was given to the material dimension of the ritual. As masks are typically crafted by the performers themselves, the fieldwork included documenting the processes of mask-making and costume preparation. Several interviews were therefore conducted with individuals involved in the making of masks and ritual accessories. Additional interviews were conducted with individuals specialised in producing certain elements of

the rituals, such as bells, in order to understand both how these objects are made and the role they play in the performance.

The research was further complemented by an analysis of community-managed social media channels used to promote the custom. Frequently identified by research participants as key sources of information, these platforms offer valuable insight into how the community represents, narrates, and publicly presents this cultural practice. Their examination provides an additional perspective on the contemporary evolution of the custom and on the ways in which its cultural significance is expressed and negotiated in the digital sphere.



Theoretical framing and context

Recent scholarship has challenged the understanding of heritage as the simple preservation of an authentic past, emphasizing instead its character as a cultural and political process through which communities, institutions and other actors negotiate what should be remembered, displayed, and transmitted (Bendix 1997, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 2004, Smith 2006, Harrison 2013). Many European masquerades have become subject to processes of heritagisation, as communities and institutions increasingly seek to preserve, promote and publicly represent them as elements of intangible cultural heritage. Rather than simply safeguarding existing traditions, however, heritagisation frequently generates new cultural forms by reshaping ritual practices, values, and material expressions in response to changing social and institutional contexts (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Smith 2006, Bortolotto 2015).

Recent studies of European masquerades have similarly shown that heritagisation is not merely a process of conservation but an ongoing negotiation over authenticity, legitimacy, and public representation (Broccolini 2016, Panero García and Pinelo Tiza 2023, Perricone 2023). These negotiations extend beyond competing narratives about the past, reshaping the practices, bodies, and material objects through which rituals are performed.

The transformations described above suggest that heritagisation operates not only through the production of heritage discourses but also through the material reconfiguration of ritual objects. Rather than asking how heritagisation affects ritual, the question becomes how competing heritage discourses are translated into material forms that subsequently reshape ritual practice. Heritage interventions do not simply redefine the meanings attributed to ritual objects; they also transform the material conditions under which ritual action takes place.

In Păunești, one of the principal arenas in which these negotiations unfold is the mask itself. As local authorities have increasingly promoted a visually legible and publicly acceptable form of heritage, they have also acted upon an imagined audience whose presumed expectations privilege spectacle, order, and cultural display over embodied interaction (Smith 2006, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Urry 1990). The community, however, responded not by abandoning the ritual but by investing more heavily in the materiality of the masks, redirecting creative effort from bodily performance towards the object itself.

Following Gell's (1998) notion of agency, while drawing on broader approaches to material culture (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986, Miller 2005), I argue that the mask should not be understood merely as a passive representation of heritage. Its changing material properties reshape the possibilities for ritual action and, in doing so, they actively participate in the

transformation of ritual practice. The argument developed here is therefore not simply that heritagisation changes ritual, but that it does so through the material reconfiguration of ritual objects. The mask thus emerges not only as an object of heritage but also as one of the main mediators through which competing understandings of heritage are negotiated, enacted, and contested.



The mask costume

The archaic form of the mask, as described by elderly performers, consisted of a large sheepskin shaped into a cylindrical form that covered the performer's entire head and chest. Openings were cut for the eyes and mouth, while irregular teeth were created from beans. A long, pointed nose made of cloth was attached to the front of the mask. On either side of the head, two goose wings were attached to wooden slats. The wooden structure was further decorated with dried pig intestines left hanging loosely, as well as an inflated and dried pig bladder filled with cereal grains, which produced a rattling sound whenever the mask moved. Around the waist, performers wore a wide leather belt from which cattle bells, typically measuring around 15-20 cm, were suspended.

Beginning in the 1970s, the masks increased significantly in size. The wooden structure above the head was extended upwards, while the accessories made from pig intestines and pig bladder were gradually abandoned. In their place, industrially produced decorative elements such as ribbons, beads, and crepe paper were introduced. The upper part of the mask developed into a large decorative surface covered with patterned fabric. According to local memory, this area was sometimes adorned with postcards or even record covers featuring photographs of popular singers of folklore-inspired music.

As the mask itself grew in scale, so did the accessories accompanying it. The bells, which had once been ordinary livestock bells, began to be specially manufactured for the ritual and became much larger and louder. Today, these bells measure approximately 40-50 cm. Only children still wear the smaller bells resembling those used in the past. (Fig. 1)

As the masks became increasingly imposing, many of the traditional decorative elements were gradually abandoned. The wings remained an essential component, but goose wings, considered too small, were replaced by swan wings. Pig bladders disappeared entirely and were replaced by brightly coloured ribbons, Christmas ornaments, and tinsel. The head itself continues to be covered with a fur mask that preserves the traditional model, but the feathers are now mounted on a large wooden structure resting on the performer's shoulders. This structure can reach approximately 1.5-2 meters in width and rise up to 1.5 meters above the wearer's head, giving the mask a striking monumental appearance. (Fig. 2)

The masked groups themselves, locally referred to as *Pluguri*, are organised according to the different areas of the village from which the performers come. At present, approximately four such groups are formed, corresponding to the four hills across which the settlement extends (Novăcești, Surla, Bârnova, and Bostănești). In the past, however, there were significantly more such groups.





Fig. 1. Old and New Bell. Photo by Adelina Dogaru.



Fig. 2. *Uncheși* mask. Photo by Cătălin Alexa.

Mask and violence

Another significant component of the performance concerns the protective and transformative function of the mask. By concealing the identity of the wearer, the mask temporarily suspends ordinary mechanisms of social recognition and accountability, creating a space in which behavioural norms may be loosened or even inverted. Within the carnivalesque framework, such anonymity allows participants to engage in acts of symbolic disorder, including mockery and satirical denunciation of undesirable behaviours or events that marked the community during the previous year. In this sense, masking operates not merely as an element of costume but also as a performative device that enables the ritual articulation of social tensions. Within this temporary suspension of normative order, violence occasionally appears as a secondary but historically documented aspect of the custom. Collective memory preserves numerous accounts of confrontations between masked participants who took advantage of the anonymity afforded by their costumes to settle unresolved personal disputes. Oral testimonies collected in the community suggest that the festive moment itself was sometimes regarded as an opportunity to address grievances accumulated over the course of the year.

One such testimony recalls masked groups descending from the surrounding hills towards the centre of the village, carrying knives between their teeth and ready to confront rival groups if they encountered them along the way. While such episodes do not necessarily occur every year, their persistence in local narratives illustrates how the ritual context generates a liminal space in which ordinary forms of restraint could be temporarily relaxed.



They used to cut each other. They would stand there under the mask with the knife in their mouth. After drinking a bucket of wine, he would suddenly remember that they had argued sometime during the year. You know, when you're under the mask you have a different kind of courage. (Niculai Cautici, 60, Păunești, Vrancea, January 2026)

During the communist period, local authorities introduced measures to regulate such behaviour and reduce the risk of violence. Masked participants were required to wear numbered armbands issued by the authorities in exchange for their identity cards. This administrative measure allowed individuals involved in conflicts to be identified and held accountable if injuries occurred during the festivities. The intervention illustrates an early tension between the traditional logic of ritual disorder and the modern state's attempt to maintain public order and exercise administrative control over the custom.

Such forms of strict administrative control were gradually abandoned after 1990, leading to a noticeable decline in the vitality of the custom. On the one hand, community interest diminished. On the other, recurring episodes of violence and disorder, whether ritualized or not, required the involvement of gendarmes to maintain public order and ensure participants' safety, which created a further source of tension. This decline prompted local authorities to intervene once again and introduce measures aimed at restoring the carnival's prestige and significance within village cultural life.

These successive interventions produced a series of transformations. In particular, they reveal the processes through which aesthetic choices and institutional initiatives have reshaped the masks and masking practices in Păunești, illustrating how local actors actively negotiate the form and meaning of the tradition.



Pandemic restrictions and the reconfiguration of the space

Another significant moment in the evolution of the custom came with the COVID-19 pandemic and the public-safety regulations introduced in its aftermath, which have significantly transformed the conditions under which the custom is performed. Traditional house-to-house carolling has been largely discontinued for safety reasons. Instead, substantial numbers of gendarmes are deployed to establish a clearly defined perimeter within which the movement of masked performers is permitted. The temporal framework of the custom has also been altered: carolling is now restricted to daytime hours, as nocturnal performances are subject to separate regulations and require special permits.

As a result, the traditional visits to individual households can no longer take place, and the presence of masked groups in the streets of the village is limited to a single day. The practice of carolling traditionally involved reciprocal exchanges with householders and the consumption of food and, in particular, alcohol. Once the performance itself became more restricted, alcohol consumption declined. Because alcohol had often intensified tensions within the community, this reduction has also contributed to a decrease in violent incidents.

Carnavalesque disorder is therefore no longer enacted primarily through direct social interaction but is instead condensed into symbolic representation mediated through sensory effects. The centre of the village, more precisely, the circular area surrounding the town hall, has become the designated space in which the masked performance can take place. This spatial reconfiguration also shapes a specific pattern of movement resembling a parade, reinforcing the festive character of the event. The value and significance of the custom are now expressed within an artificial framework of celebration, comparable to a theatrical stage.

The selection of a specific area of the village, transformed into a ritual *dispositif* (Lardellier 2008), preserves the festive dimension of the custom while simultaneously imposing a new form of conduct on participants. The boundary between performer and audience becomes more clearly defined through the allocation of separate spaces: a designated performance area, or stage, for the masked participants and a delimited viewing area for spectators.

This transformation generates a hybrid form in which the behaviour of stage performers intersects with the ritual gestures of traditional masked actors. The deafening sound of the bells is concentrated within this restricted space, while the performers' voices are amplified through microphones. At the same time, the performers' movements become more static and stylised, producing a more theatrical form of performance. The cracking of the whip, once a powerful sonic element of *Plugușorul*, is now largely symbolic: performers move the whip through the air rather than striking it forcefully against the ground, as the narrow and crowded space no longer allows for its full use.

The delimited space, to which only performers wearing *Uncheși* masks are admitted, thus becomes a controlled ritual arena in which the custom continues to be enacted under new spatial, temporal, and institutional conditions.



On the edge

Beyond its spectacular dimension, the custom must be understood within the broader carnivalesque framework that characterises many winter rituals associated with the

transition between the old and the new year. Such rituals unfold within what anthropologists have described as a liminal temporal space, an ambiguous interval situated between two symbolic orders, in this case between the end of one calendrical cycle and the beginning of another. As Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969) have shown, moments of transition often generate ritual environments in which ordinary structures of social life are temporarily suspended or reconfigured. Within these liminal intervals, ambiguity, transformation, and symbolic inversion become not only possible but culturally meaningful.

The act of masking plays a central role in producing this liminal condition. By concealing the identity of the performer, the mask enables a temporary departure from everyday social roles, allowing individuals to assume alternative identities that would otherwise remain inaccessible within the ordinary framework of community life (Belting 2017). In this sense, masking constitutes a process of becoming other, through which the performer symbolically steps outside the social position ordinarily assigned to them. This transformation is accompanied by behaviours characteristic of the carnivalesque register, such as loud noise, mockery, exaggerated gestures, and other forms of temporary disruption of established hierarchies.

In this context, the ritual environment moves between normative acceptance and transgression. Acts that would normally be condemned, such as satire, ridicule, verbal aggression, or forms of controlled disorder, become tolerated and sometimes even expected within the ritual frame. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) famously argued in his analysis of the carnivalesque, liminal manifestations do not simply represent chaos or social breakdown. Rather, they constitute structured forms of temporary inversion through which communities symbolically renegotiate power relations, norms, and collective anxieties. These ritualised transgressions often function as mechanisms through which tensions accumulated within the social order are publicly expressed and temporarily negotiated (Girard 1977, Testa 2021).

The winter carnival thus produces a complex ritual environment in which temporal, social, and symbolic boundaries become porous. The thresholds between past and future, order and disorder, life and death are momentarily opened, allowing for encounters with figures that themselves embody this ambiguity. It is precisely within this liminal framework that the symbolic presence of ancestral figures, such as the *Uncheși*, acquires its full significance.

The *Uncheși*, figures present within the Romanian carnivalesque repertoire and understood locally as ancestral beings, are conceived as travellers from the world of the dead. They are invoked simultaneously as protectors and as agents of controlled ritual disturbance that mark the passage between two worlds, symbolizing both continuity and the ultimate triumph of life over death. In this context, the liminal framework of the carnival is constructed through the symbolic evocation of an uncertain boundary between the living and the dead. The wings of the mask reinforce the idea of the traveling, winged soul that materializes through the mask in ritual performance.

Elements associated with death and mortality also appear in the accessories sometimes used by masked performers, who in the past would carry small animals or animal remains, using them to frighten passers-by. Today, however, such practices are discouraged by the organizers of the parade, who exclude participants who incorporate these elements into their costumes.

The presence of dead animals, such as a cat, a ferret, or a mouse, or of animal remains, such as a pig's head or a chicken's foot, carried by *Uncheși*, may once have served magical or apotropaic functions. Over time, however, these objects have gradually lost their original ritual efficacy, becoming primarily a costume accessory. Nevertheless, until relatively recently these elements continued to play a significant role within the carnivalesque performance by deliberately provoking a form of ritualized disgust. Participants would bring these remains



close to spectators, intentionally provoking reactions of repulsion and fear, two emotions that are closely intertwined, as disgust frequently overlaps with fear, particularly when associated with death and bodily decay (Miller 1997).

What is at stake in this interaction is not death itself, but rather the unsettling material presence of the dead body. The object of disgust is the dead body, feared not because of the killing it implies, but because of its state of decomposition. By confronting spectators with this disturbing materiality, the masked performers temporarily disrupt ordinary sensory boundaries and social conventions surrounding the handling and display of dead bodies.

Within the carnivalesque framework, this deliberate transgression of sensory and moral norms serves a specific ritual function. The display of decaying matter, associated with impurity and danger (Douglas 1966) in many cultural contexts (Menninghaus 2003, Rozin and Fallon 1987), produces a momentary inversion of everyday sensibilities. Disgust here becomes a performative device that destabilizes the boundaries between attraction and repulsion and between laughter and fear. Such sensory provocations contribute to the creation of the chaotic and ambivalent atmosphere characteristic of carnival, in which the ordinary order of things is symbolically suspended.

At the same time, the emphasis placed on the materiality of the dead body resonates with broader anthropological interpretations of the grotesque and the carnivalesque. Grotesque imagery often foregrounds the body in states of transformation, decay, or excess, thereby highlighting processes of regeneration and renewal within the cycle of life and death. In this sense, the unsettling presence of animal remains within the performance may be interpreted not merely as an element of shock or spectacle, but as a symbolic reminder of the porous boundary between life and death that the carnival temporarily makes visible.

In recent years, as previously mentioned, such practices have increasingly been discouraged or prohibited by local authorities, reflecting changing sensibilities regarding public hygiene and the aesthetic expectations associated with the contemporary presentation of traditional customs. The disappearance of these elements therefore marks not only a shift in ritual practice but also a broader transformation in the sensory and moral economy (Howes 2003) through which the carnival is experienced and interpreted.

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Transformations of spontaneous participation and performative practice. Gender and aesthetics

In addition to the *Uncheși* masks, the ritual repertoire traditionally included a female character known as *Baba* ("the old woman"). This figure was typically performed through travesty: male performers dressed in women's clothing and wore simple facial coverings that served only to conceal their identity. Over time, these rudimentary disguises were gradually replaced by commercially produced masks, but the association between the elderly male and the female figures remained a recognizable element of the performance and costume.

The presence of such gendered pairs is common across many European masked traditions, where the symbolic interaction between male and female figures often evokes themes of complementarity, fertility, and renewal (Testa 2021). In Păunești, however, this relational dimension has become progressively less visible as the variety of masks used in the performance has expanded. (Fig. 3)



Until approximately one or two decades ago, the ritual landscape of the village during the festive period was characterized by a remarkable diversity of spontaneously masked participants. Their number significantly exceeded that of performers wearing *Uncheși* masks. These participants often wore latex masks representing grotesque, demonic, or decrepit figures and impersonated a wide range of characters. In some cases, the masks depicted figures drawn from contemporary public life, most notably political leaders or globally recognizable personalities such as Vladimir Putin or, in earlier years, Osama bin Laden, who were parodied within the carnivalesque framework. Within the logic of carnival, such representations functioned less as direct political commentary than as mechanisms of parody and symbolic inversion. The authority associated with these figures was temporarily appropriated, exaggerated, and ridiculed, turning them into objects of collective laughter. In this sense, the practice aligns with broader carnivalesque traditions in which power and hierarchy are momentarily suspended through mockery and performative exaggeration (Bakhtin 1984, Testa 2021).

Such satirical representations were frequently accompanied by short comic scenes performed collectively, including mock weddings and mock funerals, forms of ritual parody commonly encountered in Romanian winter masquerades (Pop 1999, Benga 2025). The participants who masked themselves spontaneously were often responsible for many of the more dynamic aspects of the ritual.

The relative mobility afforded by their simpler masks allowed them to move freely through the village, visit households, interact with relatives, and participate in behaviours characteristic of the carnivalesque atmosphere. These included playful or sometimes aggressive confrontations, the throwing of flour, water, or feathers, alcohol consumption, and other acts that contributed to the chaotic energy traditionally associated with the ritual.

Today, however, participants engaging in such spontaneous forms of masking are largely excluded from the official performance, and the range of characters represented in the ritual has consequently narrowed.

In this context, the mask increasingly functions as an object whose visual and material presence tends to outweigh the symbolic meanings it once conveyed within the broader dramatic composition of the ritual. This shift can be understood within wider processes of heritagisation, through which local cultural practices are reframed as cultural heritage and adapted for public display and collective representation. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) has argued, the staging of tradition often involves processes of selection, emphasis, and aesthetic refinement, through which certain elements are highlighted while others are marginalized in order to produce a coherent and visually compelling representation of cultural identity.

In the case of the Păunești carnival, these dynamics have contributed to the progressive establishment of the *Uncheși* mask as the central emblem of the custom. The growing institutional promotion of this mask has been accompanied by a process of formal elaboration



Fig. 3. Capture from the movie *Mascații din Păunești, Vrancea* [The Masked Men of Păunești, Vrancea], Adina Elena Murgoci, 2013, Universitatea Media.



and enlargement that increasingly privileges visual impact. While such transformations reinforce the mask's role as a recognizable symbol of local identity, they simultaneously reshape the internal logic of the performance (Urry 1990). As the mask becomes larger and more elaborate, the performer's possibilities for movement and interaction are significantly reduced.

Consequently, the emphasis gradually shifts from the performative dimension of the ritual, once characterized by mobility, improvisation, and a wide range of carnivalesque interactions, towards the visual prominence of the mask as a heritage object. The monumental scale acquired by the *Uncheși* masks limits the performers' physical mobility and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce the gestures and dynamic forms of participation that once defined the ritual environment. In this sense, the transformation of the mask reflects a broader reconfiguration of the custom itself, from a participatory and fluid ritual practice towards a more staged and visually oriented form of cultural representation.



Aestheticization, identity, and the regulation of the carnivalesque



The contemporary transformation of the custom has also generated the gradual emergence of a specific aesthetic regime, shaped by both community pride and the desire to present an imposing and visually striking performance. The exaggeration of the mask's features, including its size, decorative richness, and visual impact, responds not only to internal dynamics of prestige among performers but also to the increasing importance of spectacle within the ritual environment.

This process of aestheticization is accompanied by a selective exclusion of elements that contemporary sensibilities perceive as disturbing or inappropriate. Practices that once formed part of the ritual repertoire, such as carrying dead animals or animal remains intended to provoke disgust or fear, are now prohibited by local authorities. The authorities criticize such practices as being in poor taste and as likely to drive away the growing number of tourists attending the ritual:

There was one fellow who tied a pig's head to his back and walked around like that, frightening people. But is that why people come here? To see things like that? Others would bring cats, whatever they could find. I told him to go home. (Marian Chiriac, 42, Director of the Cultural Center in Păunești, Vrancea, interview, January 2026)

A similar tendency towards purification can also be observed in the content of the *Plugușorul* recitations.

Although the text is adapted from year to year, older members of the community still remember certain verses that have become emblematic and were repeated for many years without alteration. In contemporary performances, however, a more neutral and largely standardised version tends to be recited. In this version, satirical elements are significantly reduced and references to specific local events are avoided, as the performance is increasingly directed towards a broader audience unfamiliar with the social context that inspired such references. The collection of older variants proved particularly difficult, as performers showed considerable reluctance to reproduce texts perceived as argotic, vulgar, of limited or no aesthetic value, or simply no longer relevant.

They were parodies. Do people travel hundreds of kilometres just to hear parodies? I didn't think that was appropriate. They want to see something authentic. What is authentic about a bunch of parodies? (*Idem*)

The custom has increasingly been oriented towards a broader public, contributing to the construction of a favourable image of the community for external audiences. In this process, local authorities assume a regulatory and protective role, seeking both to sustain community participation and to ensure that the event presents a socially acceptable and culturally valued image. This intervention often results in a process of gradually "civilising" the ritual environment through the regulation of aesthetic standards, the disciplining of behaviour, and the exclusion of elements perceived as disruptive or incompatible with contemporary expectations of public representation.



According to the director of the local cultural centre, there has been a deliberate effort to concentrate the performance around the *Uncheși* masks, which are perceived as distinctive and emblematic of the village. This orientation reflects a broader attempt to present a coherent and recognizable image of the tradition to external audiences.

Within this framework, the ritual becomes increasingly subject to aesthetic regulation, through processes of heritagisation that privilege forms of public display compatible with dominant heritage aesthetics. I conceptualize this process as *visual hygiene*. Certain elements that were once present in the carnival, such as spontaneous masking or characters perceived as vulgar, grotesque, or excessively modern, have been gradually marginalized or excluded. The aim of these interventions is not only to maintain order but also to ensure that the event produces a positive and visually compelling image of the community.

Forms of spontaneous masking have also been progressively excluded. These participants often used latex masks representing grotesque or demonic figures, or impersonated characters drawn from contemporary public life, including international political figures parodied through masking and travesty. Such practices are now frequently perceived as vulgar or inappropriate for a tradition understood as ancestral and representative of local identity.

This perception rests partly on the idea that such masks involve little effort or creativity, since they are purchased rather than made, while the relative simplicity of assembling the overall masked costume is interpreted as a sign of vulgarity rather than creativity. At the same time, their explicit references to contemporary figures are seen as disruptive intrusions of modernity into a ritual domain increasingly framed as belonging to the sphere of tradition. The symbolic association between collective identity and cultural forms perceived as traditional thus generates a tendency towards aesthetic purification and standardization. What becomes emblematic of the custom is increasingly determined by what appears visually pleasing and morally acceptable within an idealized cultural economy of tradition, one that often corresponds less to an archaic model than to its contemporary reconstruction.

The effort to define which elements legitimately represent tradition simultaneously entails the exclusion of practices considered incompatible with contemporary norms of taste, morality, or public representation. Such processes of symbolic purification and aesthetic regulation can be understood within broader dynamics of heritage construction and the negotiation of authenticity (Bendix 1997, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). In these contexts, local cultural practices are not simply preserved but selectively reframed and curated to produce a coherent and publicly acceptable image of tradition. Elements perceived as disorderly, excessive, or morally ambiguous, such as violent encounters, grotesque imagery, or forms of spontaneous masking, tend to be marginalized, while visually striking and aesthetically refined components are emphasized and promoted as emblematic representations of local identity.

Interviews conducted with members of the community suggest that the progressive enlargement of both masks and bells is largely driven by the performers themselves. The creation of increasingly imposing costumes is often motivated by a sense of pride and competition among participants, with each seeking to create a more spectacular and visually striking appearance than the others. In this sense, the mask functions not only as a ritual object but also as a visible marker of prestige within the community. (Viorel Câmpanu, 33, bell maker, Păunești, January 2025)

The bells attached to the performers' belts, for instance, may weigh up to twenty kilograms, while the wooden structures supporting the masks can reach considerable dimensions. The preparation for the ritual therefore begins weeks before the performance itself. From the beginning of December, the sound of bells can already be heard throughout the village as performers prepare their costumes, repair masks, and rehearse so that they become accustomed to the weight of the costume and the movements required to perform in it.

Ringling the large bells requires considerable physical effort and often demands prior training. Without such preparation, the repetitive motion and weight of the costume may cause considerable discomfort or even pain. From this perspective, the performance of the *Uncheși* masks can also be understood as an embodied practice in which sensory intensity, physical endurance, and collective preparation contribute to the production of the ritual experience. The sonic dimension of the ritual thus begins to shape the village's sensory landscape long before the actual performance takes place, building expectations and emotional intensity.

At the same time, these transformations respond to a contemporary regime of sensory consumption that privileges immediate visual impact and spectacle. As David Howes has argued, modern cultural environments increasingly operate within a sensory economy in which cultural products are designed to produce strong impressions and memorable experiences for audiences (Howes 2005). Within this framework, masks are no longer valued solely for their ritual efficacy or symbolic functions but also for their capacity to attract attention, impress spectators, and circulate as visually compelling markers of heritage. The emphasis on monumental scale, elaborate decoration, and carefully controlled presentation reflects this shift towards a *hyper-aestheticised* mode of experiencing tradition, in which the visual and sensory intensity of the object becomes increasingly central to its cultural value.

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Negotiating spectacle: the limits of monumentalisation

The interaction between the competitive creativity of performers and the aesthetic regulation promoted by local authorities has produced significant transformations in the performance. As the masks and bells have grown in size and weight, the possibilities for movement have become increasingly restricted.

Under conditions of strong wind, the masks can no longer be safely worn on the performer's head, as they risk being damaged or blown to the ground.

That's the Romanian pride... That boy who made that huge mask last year—the wind knocked him over. He couldn't even manage it. Just imagine, the mask is two and a half metres high... and he's about two metres himself. One gust of wind and you turn into a hang glider. (Marian Chiriac, 42, Director of the Cultural Center in Păunești, Vrancea, interview, January 2026)



Likewise, entering houses or indoor performance spaces becomes practically impossible. Participation in contemporary staged events, such as festivals, therefore often requires the use of smaller masks to allow performers to enter indoor venues.

I made four or five smaller masks. Sometimes they invite you to perform at New Year's parties in restaurants. Where could you go with those big ones? You'd end up with every chandelier in the place getting hooked on your mask. (Marian Chiriac, 42, Director of the Cultural Centre in Păunești, Vrancea, interview, January 2026)

A revealing episode recalled by Marian Chiriac illustrates the tensions that emerge when these practices are relocated to new settings. During a festival organized in a cultural centre (*Festivalul de Datini și obiceiuri*), spectators reportedly left the hall shortly after the masked performers from Păunești entered the space.

The overwhelming sound produced by the massive bells created an acoustic environment that proved intolerable for an indoor audience. Such episodes highlight the difficulties that arise when practices originally embedded in open-air rural settings are transferred to controlled spaces designed for conventional forms of spectacle.



Children, spectacle, and the reconfiguration of ritual roles

This symbolic restructuring of the custom is also reflected in the increasing presence of children within a ritual domain that was traditionally reserved for adult male performers. Their participation responds in part to the growing emphasis placed on spectacle and visual impact. The presence of children dressed in miniature versions of the *Uncheși* costume creates a distinctive visual attraction: the figure of the child replicating the appearance and gestures of the adult performer generates a powerful sense of fascination. The appeal lies precisely in this logic of miniaturisation, in which the symbolic and visual features of the ritual are condensed into a smaller and more approachable form. In many cases, the miniature performer becomes even more captivating to the public gaze than the adult figure it imitates. (Fig. 4)

This fascination with miniaturized figures operates as a powerful visual device. The reduced scale amplifies the visual contrast between the monumental masks worn by adult performers and the smaller bodies of the children who reproduce the same aesthetic codes.

At the same time, the presence of children contributes to reshaping the social meaning of the custom. Their participation symbolically signals the continuity of tradition and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations, while simultaneously reinforcing the image of a cohesive and harmonious community. Within the logic of public representation, children thus function as powerful visual markers of authenticity, innocence, and cultural continuity, qualities that resonate strongly with contemporary expectations of heritage and tradition.

The integration of children into the performance is also made possible by broader transformations affecting the ritual itself. The progressive suppression of violent elements and the weakening of the carnival's earlier ritual functions have altered the nature of the mask and its relationship to the body. The mask gradually ceases to function primarily as a ritual device through which identity is transformed; instead, it becomes an element of entertainment. Within this new framework, playful participation is understood as a



Fig. 4. Children wearing his *Uncheși* mask. Photo by Catalin Alexa.

legitimate activity for all members of the community, particularly for children, who are culturally associated with playfulness and joy.

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Conclusion

The transformations observed in the Păunești carnival illustrate the complex processes through which local ritual practices adapt to changing social, institutional, and cultural contexts. Far from representing a simple preservation of tradition, the contemporary form of the custom emerges from the interaction between multiple actors, interests, and interpretive frameworks.

On the one hand, performers themselves actively shape the evolution of the ritual through practices of competitive display and personal pride, expressed in the increasing scale and visual impact of the masks and other costume elements. The increasing monumentality of the *Uncheși* masks and the amplification of their sonic presence through increasingly large bells reflect a dynamic internal logic of prestige and embodied performance. Within this

framework, the ritual continues to function as a demanding physical and sensory experience, requiring preparation, endurance, and collective participation.

On the other hand, local authorities play an increasingly important role in regulating and framing the custom. Through interventions aimed at maintaining order, ensuring public safety, and presenting a coherent image of the tradition to external audiences, authorities gradually reshape the ritual according to contemporary local norms of aesthetics, morality, and public representation. The promotion of the *Uncheși* mask as the central visual emblem of the carnival, accompanied by the marginalization of other masking practices, reflects a broader process of cultural selection and symbolic purification.

These transformations correspond to wider dynamics of heritagisation, through which vernacular cultural practices are reframed for public display, cultural promotion, and heritage consumption (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Bendix 1997). In this context, tradition is not merely preserved but actively curated, with certain elements emphasised while others are excluded in order to produce a recognizable and visually compelling representation of local identity.

At the same time, the increasing emphasis placed on visual impact and the spectacular reveals the growing importance of what may be described as a contemporary sensory economy, in which cultural practices are expected to produce strong impressions and memorable experiences for audiences (Howes 2005). The mask thus acquires a dual status: it remains a ritual device embedded in local practice while simultaneously functioning as a heritage object intended to attract attention and circulate as a symbol of the community.

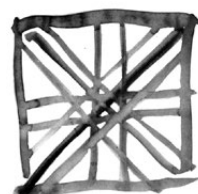
Yet these processes also generate tensions. The increasing size of the masks and bells, while enhancing their visual and sonic presence, limits the physical mobility of performers and constrains the performative possibilities of the ritual itself. Similarly, the relocation of the custom into staged contexts such as festivals or parades may create sensory and spatial mismatches between practices originally performed in open-air rural settings and contemporary spaces of spectacle.

The Păunești case suggests that the effects of heritagisation cannot be understood solely at the level of discourse, representation, or institutional regulation. They also operate through the material reconfiguration of ritual objects. As masks are redesigned, enlarged, and aesthetically regulated, they do not merely acquire new meanings. They also alter the sensory, corporeal, and performative conditions of ritual action. Materiality therefore emerges not simply as the medium through which heritage is expressed, but as a constitutive dimension of the process of heritagisation that reshapes ritual practice through heritagisation. This perspective extends existing studies of heritagisation by showing that both the process itself and its effects are mediated not only through discourse, institutional regulation, and public representation, but also through the material properties and transformations of ritual objects.

NOTES

1. In regional popular speech, a general appellative addressing or referring to an older male figure.

2. Literally “plough” (*plugușorul* being the diminutive form) refers in regional popular tradition to a New Year ritual chant that symbolically re-enacts ploughing and invokes agricultural renewal. The term may also designate the group of carollers who perform the ritual.



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