The Artist, the City and the Urban Theatre: Pieter Bruegel’s ‘Battle between Shrovetide and Lent’ (1559) Reconsidered*

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Introduction

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1528-69) is generally known for his peasant brawls, rustic landscapes and proverbs. In addition, the contemporary city and urban culture were a vast source of inspiration, and Bruegel depicted this urban landscape in various forms; ranging from distant city views in the background of drawings or paintings to detailed multi-figured scenes located in the midst of a realistic-looking town. This paper focusses on the latter and wants to investigate the nature of such representations and the precise meaning(s) of the urban landscape. In particular, I want to examine how we can gain information on social realities through the study of the urban landscape. The case study concerns a large scale oil painting made by Bruegel in 1559: The Battle between Shrovetide and Lent (Figure 1).¹ This title was already given by Karel van Mander, the artist’s first biographer,² and the painting belongs to the group of so-called encyclopaedic works, a pictorial and didactic genre devised by Bruegel around 1560.³ In this cluster, Bruegel observes and renders the ‘human menagerie’ in a

¹ This paper was first presented during the European Association for Urban History conference in Ghent in 2010. The revised version is based on Chapter 5 of my forthcoming dissertation: The Artist, The City and the Landscape: Representations of Urban Landscape in the Oeuvre of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1528-1569) (unpublished doctoral thesis, Ghent University, 2013). I would like to thank the FWO Vlaanderen (Fund for Scientific Research Flanders) for the grant that enabled me to accomplish my PhD.

² ‘Hy heft oock ghemaectt een stuck, daer den Vasten teghen den Vasten-avondt strijdt’ (he has also made, a piece, where Lent is combating Shrovetide), Karel Van Mander, Het schilder-boeck (Haarlem: Paschier van Wesbusch, 1604), fol. 233v. This is also the designation given to the theme in Middle Dutch literature, see: Roger H. Marijnissen and others, Pieter Bruegel. Het volledige oeuvre (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 1988), p. 146.

³ Besides The Battle between Shrovetide and Lent, this group consists out of the Children’s Games (1560, also in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, inv. 1017) and The Proverbs (1559, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, inv. 1720). See: Marijnissen, Bruegel, pp. 133-57, 161-63; Manfred Sellink, Pieter Bruegel: The Complete Paintings, Drawings and Prints (Ghent: Ludion, 2007), pp. 128-31, 153. The similitudes regarding the medium, creation date, size and subject matter led several scholars to believe that the paintings were conceived as a whole. Unfortunately, we do not know the circumstances in which the works were created so this hypothesis can neither be confirmed nor denied. See for example: Georges Hulin de Loo, Carl Gustav Stridbeck, Bruegelstudien: Untersuchungen zu den ikonologischen Problemen bei Pieter Bruegel d.Ä., sowie dessen Beziehungen des niederländischen Romanismus (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1956), pp. 200-2; Marijnissen, Bruegel, p. 162; Walter S. Gibson, Bruegel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), pp. 85-88;
similar -albeit pictorial- way like Sebastian Brant, Erasmus of Rotterdam and François Rabelais had done before him. One of the characteristics of these encyclopedic pictures is the abundant rendering of social activity; a multitude of figures is scattered around the scene and the myriad of details reflects Bruegel’s insatiable interest in the human condition in all its variety. Moreover, the paintings have a large panoramic format with an elevated viewpoint and a high horizon, creating the impression that the figures are performing on a scene while the viewer is watching the spectacle from a balcony. In the case of *The Battle between Shrovetide and Lent*, the composition is staged on a large public square of a realistic-looking town. The square is enclosed by buildings and the figures are scattered around and actively using the urban space. The emphasis on social activity enhances the real-life character of the urban setting. As the designation referred to by Van Mander already reveals, the central theme is the allegorical fight between Lent and Shrovetide or Carnival. Traditionally, Bruegel’s *Battle* has been interpreted as a triumph of Virtue over worldly pleasures and self-indulgence. Occasionally, the painting was even construed as an allegorical representation of Lutheranism (symbolized by Shrovetide and its retinue) engaging a battle with the Catholic Church (personified by Lent), interpreting the picture as an accusation against the pageantry that often accompanied devotional practices. Unfortunately, such iconological explanations are purely speculative and not based on verifiable grounds. Also, more conventional interpretations are not entirely satisfactory since they seldom take into account the urban setting rendered so realistically by Bruegel. Some scholars mention the urban character, and in a number of cases, the authors shortly describe the setting. However, a meticulous analysis of the urban landscape reveals the complex character of the setting and sheds light on the original intentions the artist must have had when he painted the picture. The current research provides insight into the manner in which different social groups effectively perceived and

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5 For an overview of different interpretations of the painting, see: Marijnissen, *Bruegel*, pp. 146-48.


used urban space. To unravel these clues, a thorough investigation of the urban fabric is required.

**The urban fabric**

The appearing truthful rendering of urban landscape seems to suggest contemporary city life. The large square in the centre is enclosed by buildings. The precise investigation of each of these buildings is essential to gain insight into the composition and typological constellation of the urban fabric and the intended meaning underlying the built environment. The town square functions as a central point, a node in the representation. On the left we discern an inn with a recognisable sign which reads *In de blauwe schuit* (‘In the blue barge’, Figure 2). Just like the barge on which the stride barrel of Shrovetide is fixed, the designation recalls the Guild of the blue barge or Guild of fools. The oldest description of this mocking guild is to be found in *Van vrouwen ende van minne* (‘Of women and of love’), a Middle Dutch poem written by Jacob van Oestvoren in the first half of the fifteenth century. The guild appears to have been temporarily active during festivities associated with Shrovetide. Although Herman Pleij claims the guild never existed in real life, there are several indications that suggest exactly the opposite. Written sources attest the presence of a *Blauwe schuit* (‘Blue barge’) in Antwerp and the guild seems to have been well-known. Additionally, there are references both in Bergen-op-Zoom and ‘s-Hertogenbosch that suggest the actual existence of such organizations. Moreover, several so-called buildings (guild houses or inns?) existed in the Low Countries during the Late Medieval and Early Modern period. Also, we know of the

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*9* Pleij, Blauwe Schuit, p. 225 and further.


*11* Enklaar, *Varende Luyden*, pp. 54-60.

utilization of blue barges during carnival processions. The guild mocked the established social order in a humorous and moralizing manner and the subject was quite popular in sixteenth-century literature and iconographic sources. A well-known example is the engraving by Pieter van der Heyden, published by Hiëronymus Cock in 1559 and ascribed to ‘Bosch’ on the plate (Figure 3). Just as Jheronimus Bosch’ Ship of Fools in the Louvre, this kind of popular imagery belongs to a common visual and literary tradition which also includes literary works such as Sebastian Brandt’s Narrenschiff (1494) and Erasmus’s Praise of Foly (1511). The imagery deals with socially unacceptable types such as beggars, cripples, mentally ill or other figures in the margins of society who are represented as passengers in a (blue) barge or ship; the voyage symbolizing the allegorical exclusion of such marginal types out of society. The presence of the inn In the Blue Barge in Bruegel’s Battle is not at all surprising in this context since Carnival was the perfect occasion of mocking contemporary society and reversing prevalent values. Behind The Blue Barge we discern another tavern, recognizable by the sign In den draak (‘In the dragon’, figure 2). Both on the inns as well as on several other façades of the buildings in the back of the scene we distinguish particular rectangular and rhombus-shaped objects. Similar vignettes are to be found on the outside of the taverns in Bruegel’s Kermis at Hoboken and Saint George’s Kermis (Figure 4). In both kermises, theatre plays are being performed on a scaffold erected before a building. Also, we discern similar rhombus-shaped vignettes on the façade of the adjacent buildings where the play is performed. Such plays were organized by the rederijkers or local rhetoricians and they were a typical pastime during kermises and other festivities in the Low Countries. Moreover, the depiction of particular plays in kermis scenes appears to be a phenomenon originating in these

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17 Kermises are annual outdour fairs or festivals, typical for the Low Countries.
regions and Bruegel was one of the first artist to do so. Both in the *Kermis at Hoboken* as well as in the *Saint George’s Kermis*, the scaffolds on which the plays are being performed, are placed before a building on which a similar rectangular object is fixed. The precise location of such vignettes suggests they might be some sort of identity markers, e.g. blazons or emblems belonging to a particular group of rhetoricians. An engraving of a kermis scene in the *Rijkprentenkabinet* in Amsterdam after a design by David Vinckboons provides further clues; a man on the scaffold hands over a blazon to another figure standing inside the playhouse (Figure 5). The latter apparently plans on fixing the vignette to the décor.

Although the specific iconographic features of the blazon are not easy to discern, it is clear that it concerns a rhombus-like blazon in rebus, most likely from one of the local rhetoricians groups. Besides the existing habit of fixing their personal blazons on the scaffold or playhouse where they were performing, rhetoricians also hung their personal emblem on the façade of the building were they gathered. Moreover, inns and taverns were preferred locations for such meetings and the guild’s device was often hung at the height of the first floor. It seems to be no coincidence that the rectangular and rhombus-like vignettes on the buildings in Bruegel’s *Battle* are exactly fixed at the height of the first floor. Additionally, the plays being performed before both inns enhance the connection with the local practices of the rhetoricians (cf. infra).

Opposed to the inns, on the other side of the market place, the architectural ensemble is of a more serene and pious nature; the church partly rendered being the décor for churchgoing man, women and children. Apart from the inns on the left side and the church on the right side, it is rather difficult to discern the precise functions of the represented buildings and they seem to be significant for their general appearance and compositional role in creating the urban experience. They do not display such an explicit functional meaning as the inns and church. This clear-cut functional meaning is not without significance.

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19 Willem Isaaksz. Swanenburg after a design by David Vinckboons, *Village kermis*, c. 1610, engraving, 443 x 710 mm, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, inv. RP-P-OB-70.168.
The social fabric

The explicit emphasis on social activity (c. 200 figures) on the square, streets and in the surrounding buildings enhances the real-like character of the urban setting. The two protagonists -or more precise antagonists- are allegorical representations of Shrovetide and Lent (Figure 6). They are each other’s counterparts in an almost caricatural way; Shrovetide being a hoggish figure who straddles a wine barrel that is mounted on a small blue barge and pushed by several carnivalesque figures. On his head he wears a fat pie stuffed with a bird while his right hand is holding a spit with roasted meat; a clear reference to the ubiquitous presence of food during the celebration of Carnival. In front of him, Lent is represented as an emaciated woman who is seated on a plain wooden chair, suitably drawn by a nun and a monk. She is adorned with a beehive, referring to the papal crown and thus to the Church, and in her right hand she holds a broiling-iron with two fish, a symbol for the abstinence that is so characteristic for the forty-day fast of Lent. Both allegorical figures seem to engage in a mock battle in parody of a medieval joust. In this regard we can refer to the *Bataille de Karesme et de Charnage*, a thirteenth-century French literary antecedent of which several editions were published during the first half of the sixteenth century.\(^{21}\) The text elaborates on the battle between Carnival and Lent and numerous elements of the text were incorporated in Shrovetide plays. More specific, the motif of the combat most probably emerged in analogy with Shrovetide texts on the battle between summer and winter, preferably represented in the form of a joust.\(^{22}\) Although it is not completely clear if such ritual combats were effectively preformed, several burlesque jousts are recorded in Bruges during Carnival in the fifteenth century.\(^{23}\) A similar case during Nuremberg Carnival (1515) is described in a ‘Schembartbuch’ dating from the beginning of the seventeenth century.\(^{24}\) Behind and next to the protagonists, or more precise antagonists, we discern different groups of figures and their activities can all be related to particular customs associated with Shrovetide or Lent. Bruegel’s *Battle* appears to be a genuine source for the study of contemporary practices, and according to folkloristic research, the customs and costumes are portrayed down to the


\(^{22}\) Pleij, *Blauwe Schuit*, p. 20.


\(^{24}\) Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel and the Common Man*, pp. 28, 225.
minimum details.\textsuperscript{25} The retinue of Shrovetide on one hand, and the followers of Lent on the other, divide the scene in two substantial parts. They can be interpreted as processions: the cortege of Lent departing from the side entrance of the church and Shrovetide’s retinue from the left side in the back where a small crowd is watching the ritual incineration of King Winter. Such processions were a characteristic feature of contemporary Carnival celebrations, including floats and people dressed as giants, goddesses, devils and so on.\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, Bruegel’s choice for this particular setting does also conform with contemporary urban festivities where marketplaces and other town squares functioned as central nodes during religious processions, \textit{ommegangen} or royal entries (cf. infra).

In both retinues we discern different figure groups. By means of a strategic placing of these groups or vignettes Bruegel directs the observer's view through the image, implying relationships between different parts in the image.\textsuperscript{27} In the left side the streets and square are filled with revellers and carnivalesque figures. Two folk-dramas are being performed before the inns: \textit{The Maskerade of Valentin and Ourson} and \textit{The Dirty Bride} or \textit{The Wedding of Mopsus and Nisa}. The latter formed a part of the rhetoricians’ repertory and the Dirty Bride herself was a well-known typical carnival figure.\textsuperscript{28} Behind the plays we discern various groups of cripples, beggars and lepers. They represent various marginal types which, during the sixteenth century, were looked down upon as social inferiors by the urban burgher class. Moreover, they were suspected of deceitfulness, even in displaying their infirmities.\textsuperscript{29} Most of the time these socially unacceptable people were depending on alms and other acts of charity. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, paupers were generally viewed from a rather positive perspective since they incited others, e.g. well-to-do burghers, to acts of charity and evoked the ideal of poverty. However, in the course of the fifteenth century, this ideal gradually changed and by the end of the century there was a clear negative attitude towards


\textsuperscript{26} Peter Burke, \textit{Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe} (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), p. 263.

\textsuperscript{27} On Bruegel’s use of this specific technique and structures of visual communication in sixteenth-century painting, see: Kavaler, \textit{Parables of Order and Enterprise}, pp. 4-13; Carroll, \textit{Painting and Politics}, pp. 30-31, 36-37, 46-50; Margaret A. Sullivan, \textit{Bruegel and the Creative Process, 1559-1563} (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).


paupers. They were even labelled dangerous and threatening. The poor, cripple and vagabonds were degraded and simultaneously assembled into some sort of stereotype; a caricatural negative image of all righteous members of society. From the second decade of the sixteenth century onwards, this aversion against paupers eventually led to repressive measures and a general reorganization of the poor relief. In this period, representations of marginal groups thus often served as negative examples for the urban burgher class in defining and constructing their own identity. In the right side retinue of Bruegel’s picture we also discern some cripples and beggars. Some figures who have attended Mass are leaving the church and the poor have positioned themselves before the entrance in the hope of receiving some alms. The majority of the participants in the scene are people who belong to the lower social strata; the common people and marginal groups. The rather respectful way in which Bruegel rendered these figures catches the eye. They are depicted in a quite humoristic way compared to the then prevailing mocking manner in which such social groups were represented.

Another aspect that is crucial to our understanding of the urban landscape, is that well-to-do burghers and members of the aristocracy are almost entirely absent in Bruegel’s Netherlandish town. An exception is to be found in the burghers distributing alms to the poor after leaving the church. Their absence seems rather unusual since carnival festivities included carefully orchestrated events in which the prominent citizenry and resident nobles played an appreciable role. Moreover, their participation tended to manifest itself in highly ritualised forms of behaviour. Then again, their so-called absence is not necessarily surprising since the artist’s picture does not appear to be a truthful rendering of an event that actually took place (cf. infra). Besides prominent citizenry and local nobles, an important role was also

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granted to the rhetorician companies who were often asked to perform during the festivities. For example, the plays performed before both inns are a typical manifestation of the local rhetoricians or rederijkers.

However realistically looking Bruegel’s picture may be, the fact that it is not a recording of a specific festivity witnessed by the artist is also indicated by the natural landscape in the background; the vegetation represents two different seasons connected to the period of Carnival and Lent. In the right side of the panel, we discern a couple of trees with small green leaves which attest that in this side, spring has already made her entry. Above the houses on Carnival’s side, we notice some bare trees. Their presence suggests winter, the season of Shrove Tuesday. Bruegel thus deliberately opted for a simultaneous representation of both periods and the customs associated with it. This sequential rendering fits well into Bruegel’s profound interest in the cycles of nature and the different activities linked to them.

**Bruegel’s Battle between Shrovetide and Lent in context**

Comparing Bruegel’s *Battle* with contemporary representations of the subject, the originality of the setting is striking. Bruegel most likely drew inspiration from a print made by Frans Hogenberg which was published in 1558, just a year before Bruegel finished his version (Figure 7). Moreover, the etching was published by Hieronymus Cock, Bruegel’s own print publisher. Hogenberg focussed on the main allegorical personages and their retinues are also situated in the foreground. In the background we discern a square with a small parish church surrounded by different buildings and a natural landscape. It is a clear-cut rural setting and at the horizon we see the silhouette of a distant city. Unlike Hogenberg, Bruegel situates the battle in a specific urban setting which provides the scene with an essential urban context. Moreover, the represented architecture serves several inherent functions. Whereas Hogenberg’s rural setting merely fulfils a background function, Bruegel’s square and adjacent

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36 Frans Hogenberg, *Battle between Shrovetide and Lent*, 1558, etching.

buildings form the immediate décor of the central scene. Additionally, the scenery is actively occupied by the figures. Bruegel was one of the first artists to integrate the subject into a realistically looking town centre. However realistic-looking Bruegel’s setting might be rendered, several indications suggest that the décor is a careful construction rather than a truthful rendering of an existing town. This realistic rendering enhances the real-life character of the scene and the familiarity of the everyday surroundings brings the viewer closer. Moreover, the typological constellation of the setting is neither coincidental nor accidental; the specific lay-out shows remarkable parallels with contemporary ceremonial festivities, which were characteristic manifestations of the early modern urban culture. Around 1560, the Antwerp metropolis was the second largest city north of the Alps. Evidently, in such an important commercial centre, there were a lot of squares and various marketplaces. In Guicciardini’s account of the city in his Descrittione, the author devotes a passage to the general outlook of the Antwerp squares; mentioning the Beursplein (‘Place of the Stock Exchange’) as the most beautiful and the Grote Markt (‘Grand Place’) as the largest. The central location of marketplaces made them the focal point of the political, social and cultural life. Moreover, these particular key-places were used by townsmen to shape public life and ritualize all kinds of activity. During processions, ommegangen or royal entries, marketplaces and other town squares became the focal point of ritual movements. Throughout these

38 For previous and contemporary representations of The Battle between Shrovetide and Lent, see Chapter 5 in my forthcoming PhD The Artist, the City and the Landscape: Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s Representations of Urban Landscapes in Context.  
39 From a morphological point of view, squares or marketplaces are important constitutive elements that shape the form of a specific city. Besides buildings, roads and town walls, squares are one of the characteristic features that define the morphological space of late medieval and early modern cities. For a general introduction to the study of morphological features of the city, see my forthcoming PhD-thesis: The Artist, the City and the Landscape: Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s Representations of Urban Landscape (Ghent University 2014). See also: Bernard Gauthiez, Espace urbain: vocabulaire et morphologie. Principes d’analyse scientifique (Paris: Monum, 2003) and the contribution of Bram Vannieuwenhuyze and Elien Vernackt in this volume.  
40 Ludovico Guicciardini, Descrittione di tutti I Paesi Bassi, altrimenti detti Germania Inferiori (Antwerp, 1567), the French edition of 1641 is available online on the site of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. For the description of the Antwerp marketplaces, see: p. 90: http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k83431q/f166.image  
ceremonial occasions, the inherent competitive tensions and activities of economic life were temporarily suspended and marketplaces functioned as a stage for social action. For example, during Philip II’s *blijde inkomst* (‘triumphal entry’) in Antwerp in 1549, the ceremonial route included several important squares and marketplaces, such as the *Vlasmarkt* and the *Grote Markt*, where spectacles and *tableaux vivants* were being performed. More specific, such public places were used to reiterate or reformulate the reciprocal power relations between sovereign and subjects. Marketplaces fulfilled similar significant functions during processions; these religious parades were also characterized by ritual movements through the city’s actual morphological space, and public squares constituted important parts of the décor where these processions evolved. The same accounts for contemporary theatre practices where marketplaces were important locations for the performance of popular plays. Such public manifestations of late medieval and early modern urban culture can best be regarded as huge plays in which the main streets and squares became stages, the city became a theatre and the inhabitants and visitors who took part in the play became actors or spectators. During such festivities and more specific procession plays, the adjacent buildings also acted as stages for the performed ceremonies. Likewise, there was no sharp distinction between actors or spectators, since people standing on their balconies or watching from their windows also participated in the festivities. This is precisely the setting in which Bruegel

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incorporated his *Battle between Shrovetide and Lent*. Moreover, the framing of the scenery and the specific setting resembles the set-up of contemporary theatre plays. The square being framed on three sides and the unusual high point of view provides the impression that the spectator is looking into a tribune where a puppet show or theatre is being performed. Furthermore, Bruegel’s setting literally resembles stages in contemporary plays where the marketplace is the central scene and the adjacent buildings form the scenery.\(^{49}\) Contemporary staging often consisted out of a central place surrounded by different mansions in juxtaposition. Those represented different locations or specific sites or buildings. Although in the second half of the sixteenth century, these in essence medieval ‘multiple stages’ were gradually replaced by renaissance stages, characterized by a unity of impression, such sceneries were still frequently used during Bruegel’s lifetime.\(^{50}\) The specific typology of the represented buildings also refers to contemporary theatre practices since bourgeois houses, inns and churches were part of the standard repertoire of décors.\(^{51}\) It is striking that Bruegel’s setting almost entirely resembles the one described by the Italian architect and theorist Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1554). In the second book of his architectural treatise *Regole generali di architettura*, Serlio offers advice on building perspective stage-sets. The author says that for comedies, a street scene is appropriate, with ‘a brawthell or bawdy house’, an inn, a church, and various domestic dwellings ‘for citizens’.\(^{52}\) It is not inconceivable that Bruegel found inspiration in Serlio’s description for his setting in *The Battle between Shrovetide and Lent* since his master and later father-in-law, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, was the first author to translate Serlio’s writings.\(^{53}\)

\(^{49}\) Such open sceneries were mostly figured with different groups of actors, scattered around the scene. This practice resembles Bruegel’s strategically placed figure groups.

\(^{50}\) Alois Maria Nagler, ‘Sixteenth-Century Continental Stages’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4 (1954), 358-70 (pp. 359-60); Tydeman, *Theatre in the Middle Ages*, p. 238.


Bruegel and the rederijkers

How should we explain and interpret these peculiar references to urban ceremonial festivities so clearly present in Bruegel’s *Battle between Shrovetide and Lent*? Obviously, the particular setting resembles contemporary locations where similar carnival celebrations actually took place. On the other hand, several details indicate that Bruegel did not record a specific Shrovetide celebration he had witnessed. Besides the specificity of the setting, the décor is deliberately organized in a particular way and the figures are well orchestrated. The inherent relation between Bruegel’s representation and contemporary festive culture evokes a clear connection with the practices of the local rhetorician companies. The close relation between artists and rhetoricians during the sixteenth century has long been acknowledged. A number of scholars investigated the parallels between pictorial subjects and specific rederijker themes. During the past decades, the relationship of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and the local rhetoricians received a increasing attention and nowadays a knowledge of the rederijkers and their activities is considered crucial for an understanding of Bruegel’s art. However, these studies have merely focussed on thematic parallels and not so much on morphological similarities in staging subjects. The case study *Battle between Shrovetide and Lent* demonstrates that the acknowledged connections between Bruegel and contemporary plays reach further than the mere adaptation and alteration of specific themes. Moreover, the crowded and theatrical composition in The *Battle between Shrovetide and Lent* is closely related to the notion of the *theatrum mundi*, a humanistic concept that was well-known in the sixteenth century. The widespread use of the metaphor of the theatre of the world is reflected in Erasmus *Praise of Folly* (1511) where the world is literally described as a theatre and in

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57 An exception is Bruegel’s representation of *Temperantia* in the series of *The Virtues* where the allegorical figure is standing on a small stage. See: Sellink, *Bruegel*, p. 144, cat. 86.
Ortelius’ *Theatrum orbis terrarium* (1570). Walter Gibson already remarked the relation between Bruegel’s painting and the *theatrum mundi*. The attitudes of this philosophical concept are pervasively present in the general composition and more specific in the urban stage setting and the compendium-like character of the Bruegel’s scene. The figures and figure groups then function as actors and spectators of this *theatrum*. The peculiar parallels between the setting and contemporary urban festivity staging emphasize the intentional meaning of the artist. Although the painting is often interpreted as a triumph of Virtue (on the right side) over worldly-pleasures and self-indulgence (on the left), this interpretation is not satisfying.

The picture contains an important humoristic aspect that is often neglected. Moreover, the conformities with Sebastiano Serlio’s setting for a comedy play are an additional indication in favour of a more comic interpretation. Furthermore, this correspondence again stresses the importance of the humoristic element in Bruegel’s oeuvre and the artist’s highly developed pictorial wit. Bruegel’s city scene appears like a vast stage in which human life is rendered as an absurd spectacle. In this way, the artist incites the viewer to choose the path of moderation which literally lies between the excessive conducts of the parties represented.

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59 Gibson, *Bruegel*, pp. 77-78.

