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## The Seussian Universe



You hear the proclamation, “Yes, and young George was reading Homer’s *The Iliad* by age 7!” It is a boastful exclamation, shared with pride, claimed to stranger and friend, far and wide. Everyone must know that George, the young intellectual son of bourgeois parents, is reading Homer – the classic, beautiful, and widely respected Homer. But how often do you hear the parent bursting with pride claim, “Yes, and young Johnny was reading Dr. Seuss by age 7!?” Never. This paper will explore not only why a parent might not proudly proclaim their child’s accomplishment of reading Dr. Seuss, but will also define the child, and their parents, who would read the literary anomaly that is Dr. Seuss. Dr. Seuss and his unique children’s literature fit precisely into the idea of the carnivalesque as presented by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in “Bourgeois Hysteria and The Carnavalesque.” Further, Dr. Seuss defines what is the carnivalesque, and his work can be used to represent and interpret the entire theory of bourgeois hysteria and the new, subversive carnival element as the grotesque.

To understand the relationship between Dr. Seuss, the carnivalesque, and bourgeois hysteria, we must first fully understand the theory which links them. This theory is presented in full in the book, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, in the chapter discussing “Bourgeois Hysteria and The Carnavalesque.” Essentially the theory traces the development, through industrialization and urbanization, of a bourgeois class who, in order to assert their power and avoid what they term the “grotesque,” stifle and attempt to crush the carnival elements of festivity which mark the life of the lower class and their celebratory, primal, and pagan lifestyle. This rise of the bourgeois and quelling of the carnival occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries alongside the development of industry, and thus classes. Specifically, the carnival was the grotesque: that which the bourgeois wanted to avoid. Carnival constituted the vulgar, festive nature of man, only that which the Other would participate in. “A fundamental ritual order of Western culture came under attack – its feasting, violence, drinking, processions, fairs, wakes, rowdy, spectacle and outrageous clamour,” essentially, that which was carnival was under attack (Stallybrass 102). It wasn’t necessarily that this Other was too disgusting for bourgeois

class participation, it was more an attempt to define a characteristic of separation to look down upon and allow a class of people to separate themselves and “rise above.”

With this festivity came the fear of rebellion, a gathering of all jovial energies into one rebellion, and the bourgeois determined that a method of harnessing this must be developed (Newman). Thus emerged the bourgeois concept of avoiding the carnival, the Other. “From the seventeenth to the twentieth century...there were literally thousands of acts of legislation introduced which attempted to eliminate carnival and popular festivity from European life,” for precisely the fear that these celebratory gatherings would lead to revolution (Stallybrass 102). In fact, early carnival theorists argue that bourgeois fear of the carnivalesque stemmed from the manner in which the carnival displaced and utterly inverted the normal social hierarchies which kept them in power (Stallybrass 99).

Domination and damnation of the carnivalesque into the grotesque occurred in four forms: fragmentation, marginalization, sublimation, and repression, all to prevent such feared rebellion. These modes of suppression are in continued use today in stifling the “carnival” of our modern world, whether that carnival element be of the literary text or otherwise. In fact, the modern literary text, or popular fiction, is criticized under the popular culture theory of Leavisism for precisely that reason: containing the carnival element unsuitable of the bourgeois. “Popular fiction...is condemned for offering addictive forms of ‘compensation’ and ‘distraction’: This form of compensation ...is the very reverse of recreation, in that it tends, not to strengthen and refresh the addict for living, but to increase his unfitness by habituating him to weak evasions, to the refusal to face reality at all,” (Storey 18). The carnival element, in this case in the form of popular fiction, is the grotesque festivity which must foremost be avoided and further, repressed in order to allow the bourgeois class to maintain their ignorance of distinguishing characteristics which divided “us” and “them,” and assert control over the Others who engage in this vulgarity. If they gained knowledge of the gross habits of these people below them, they were no longer any different or better – merely an addition to the crowd of festive lower class peoples. The carnivalesque has been summed up in the idea that it is that which is a break from productive activity; it is common gaiety, not constructive (Manga). This is precisely what some would say of Dr. Seuss...a mere break from productive learning and reading.

In 2004, when asked about Dr. Seuss, a children’s librarian said, “Dr. Seuss? Oh, we hide Dr. Seuss – well, not really. We keep him over there on a special shelf. We’d really rather they read something

better – something more like A.A. Milne.” (Mason). The life of Theodore Seuss Geisel, the real Dr. Seuss, and his ensuing writing style, is precisely what leads to this kind of bourgeois opinion of Dr. Seuss as grotesque and to suppress him from children. Geisel began writing his children’s books in what the popular culture Leavisites termed the ‘cultural crisis’ of the 1930’s. Throughout the twentieth century America experienced a cultural decline, claims the Leavisism theory, and this came with the advent of such pop culture literature as Geisel’s Dr. Seuss books (Storey 17). This supposed cultural decline came in the form of less intellectual and moral entertainment. The radio, television, and paperback “chain” novel were all just that – entertainment, not a moral or intellectual stimulus contributing to the forward movement of the world. They were the break from productivity which marked the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque was forced into demonization in this time, however, because with this 1930’s cultural crisis, also came the emergence of the bourgeois class system and their assertion of power lead to terming Seuss books as the grotesque, the cause of this cultural decline (Stallybrass 102). It was a full circle push, where certain items or characteristics must be marked as lesser or grotesque to allow another class to define reasons why they were better. As a result they “demonized” those culturally entertaining, delightful things that this Other class enjoyed due to basic human nature, and blamed them for a cultural decline which the bourgeois would specifically avoid. Dr. Seuss’s books would be just one victim of such a system.

Theodore Geisel developed in this repressive system, and evolved in it closely linked to the surrealist movement of the time. His pictures, and their subversive messages, were indebted to this revolutionary movement of unexpected juxtapositioning to arrive at new, unique ideas (Mason). A book published posthumously, *The Secret Art of Dr. Seuss*, is a series of paintings by Geisel which are highly surrealist. Geisel was influenced by the surrealist time he wrote in and used it as one form of inserting shreds of the carnival into his books as such a practice grew more and more oppressed. Tied to this, Geisel, aside from being a surrealist, was a man of great ambiguity – another tactic in weaving the festive carnival into his books. Freud used comic, cathartic laughter to salvage shreds of the carnival from the bourgeois subconscious of some of his hysteria patients (Stallybrass 100). They saw the feared carnival as now comic. Geisel did this to an extent with the ambiguous atmosphere of his life. Living in the time of bourgeois hysteria, Geisel obviously could not outright argue for a return to the carnivalesque. However, looking at his ambiguous stories, such as *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), they lead you down a cloudy path that in this case ends with a question, “What would YOU

do / If your mother asked YOU?” (Mason). Geisel walked through your subconscious and through ambiguous references and final question, forces the reader not only to consider their primal response, but to return to a focus on the individual. Neither of these are what a typical good bourgeois parent would want their child considering, and further are exactly the Other which they wish to avoid. But it is the time that Geisel wrote in, that of surrealism and ambiguity from an oppressive bourgeois emergence, that lead him to create such ‘grotesque’ works.

Many of these cohorts whom Geisel evolved with and received influenced from, were highly Marxist – not surprising then that they would work so hard to revolt against the bourgeois stifling. Geisel, however, was instead a left wing liberal democrat (Mason). He needed to remain comfortably friendly in order to still be invited into some American children’s homes. That is precisely the problem however. Dr. Seuss would only be invited into the homes of children with working class parents. An upper, bourgeois class of parents would have not only been disturbed at the foul pictures and language, but frightened by the ambiguous and surreal manner of the books and would not have allowed such thought into their homes. Such parents would encourage and even demand that their children hold the same social class and power as they maintain. If Dr. Seuss’s books begin encouraging a child to question authority or think independently from their parents, this certainly would have been a problem most unwelcome. Further, if a Seuss book demonstrates and leads a child back to the grotesque, festive habits that parents have worked to avoid and rise above, particularly at such a formative age, parents would come terrified their child would drop in social stature.

Stallybrass and White tell us, “There are indeed deep connections between childhood rituals, games and carnivalesque practice,” and Geisel took full advantage of such a connection to encourage children to see beyond their mental limits and embrace this festive atmosphere, whereas the bourgeois parents would have stopped the carnival long before the Dr. Seuss books – likely somewhere around the nursery rhymes and games familiar to childhood (Stallybrass 102). Geisel, for this reason, was in fact rejected by 28 publishers who feared that his form of books were not only improper to children, but would be rejected by their parents both because of the disgusting and independent habits they modeled and for their lack of intellectual propriety (Brunner). Seuss books didn’t use “real” words and certainly didn’t encourage vocabulary or early reading if they didn’t stick to the essential rules of English language. If a book was not providing an advancement in obvious, strict education, then it was not advancing a child socially. We must understand that

in the popular culture developing at the time, education is the road to high, upper-class culture, and a culture of independence, festive creativity, and inspiration was not one comfortable nor supportive to the bourgeois class and thus Dr. Seuss was not a welcome development in literary education (Storey 15). This is further evidenced by the fact that Geisel, considered a preeminent children's author, never once won the Caldecott Medal, but was instead awarded a special Pulitzer Prize for contributing to the enjoyment of America's children and parents, certainly not contributing to their production or education ("Theodore Seuss Geisel"). Geisel's carnivalesque stories encouraged children to "reach out...toward a repertoire of carnival material as both expression and support." (Stallybrass 101). The bourgeois simply could not have this.

Stallybrass said that, "The carnivalesque might erupt from the literary text, as in so much surrealist art," (105). How true this is of the texts of Dr. Seuss. The shreds of the carnival appear everywhere in the Seussian universe of Theodore Geisel's books. Primarily, due to his influence of surrealism and ambiguity, the carnival can be observed in the language, the pictures, and the basic story of each Dr. Seuss book. The twisted versions and accoutrements of the Seussian world are precisely what the bourgeois wished to avoid for they could not deal with variation, and through this distaste for diversity, they built their power. By creating a specified set of characteristics in education, language, and lifestyle, the bourgeois ensure they were different and thus better than other classes. One must not vary from these distinctive principles, or else they entered the Other of the lower class. Dr. Seuss clearly meandered away from the strictly educated, demure, focused lifestyle this upper-class prized, making him and his work grotesque.

A Dr. Seuss book can foremost be recognized by its unusual use of language. Not only the different and unique use of accepted language, but the complete creation of words as well. In fact, Geisel is attributed with the creation of the word "nerd" in his experiments with vocabulary (Brunner). Theodore Geisel essentially attacked language; he pointed out the complete arbitrariness of language by changing it. This subversive act of displaying how one man alone can shift the foundation of our communication threatened the bourgeois power. By disrespecting the traditions they demand, the rules of language, he further created fear of loss of power and mystique in those people who believed and wished themselves a social class higher than the rest (Mason). They do not wish to deal with the carnival festivity of new, exciting words; they do not wish their children to learn words which do not yet exist or to reach the conclusion that we each can use our own individual lexis. Their children would then be exiting the characteristics defining their higher

class and be entering another world, yet unchartered, which must be lower because people of bourgeois status would not stand for different rules and principles to be better than their own.

The development of 'fake' words is grotesque, and below the bourgeois class. Geisel does exactly that which C.L. Barber defines as an act of carnival: in the Seussian universe, "the energy normally occupied in maintaining inhibition is freed for celebration," (qtd. in Stallybrass 102). Dr. Seuss does not waste energy following or even learning the rules of language; instead he reverts to his festive, uninhibited human nature to express the world in his own terms. One example of this is in the book *The Lorax* (1971) which speaks of a place of "grickle-grass" and "truffula trees" as well as man named the "Once-ler." Further, new phrases are included such as "miff-muffered moof", "slupp", and a "snergelly hose". Not only are these new words and phrases, but Geisel writes in a metered form that comes out with a sing song nature – a further taunt of festivity that the bourgeois wish to suppress. He was known to use anapestic tetrameter, trochaic tetrameter, and a mixture of trochaic and iambic tetrameters (Ghare). This rhythmic sound of never before seen terminology simply serves to stir the jovial nature of readers, a shred of the carnival in a children's book. Phillip Nel, author of the book *Dr. Seuss: American Icon*, described this insolence for language best when he described the mind of Dr. Seuss as, "Why use snarl when I can use snerl?" (qtd. in Mason). Theodore Geisel would not allow the carnivalesque to be stifled, in language or otherwise.

Much the same, the carnival world is seen in the illustrations of a Dr. Seuss book. Nothing is as it should be according to the norm set by the bourgeois. Houses look different, creatures act as people, and there is not a single straight sidewalk to be found. Just one example of this in the many books of Dr. Seuss is in the book, *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960). The picture of actual green eggs and ham makes bourgeois parents cringe – there is no such thing, why is it drawn as such? Not only would bourgeois parents not want children to see such an imaginative item, but to them it is 'grotesque', not of their class and below them, an element of the Other. The book continues on with fantastic drawings of cars, trains, and boats stacked helter-skelter hurtling throughout the story on a track supported merely by a stick. Further, what is possibly the most disturbing element that pervades all Dr. Seuss books are the characters. They are furry type creatures with flappy ears and tall hats. They have only four furry fingers and webbed feet. To allow the imagination the kind of possibility laid out in full color in a Dr. Seuss book is repugnant. Bourgeois parents have no room for such wild imagination; opening that door of different, unusual principles opens the possible risk of sliding out of their own tightly guarded class.

The very activities and accessories of the books are uncivilized, unlike the bourgeois, and they entertain a sense of possibility through their buoyant nature. If such possibility is not harnessed through a general disdain and repression, then the possibility for a carnival revolution builds where the bourgeois would no longer be the most powerful class.

Looking at the illustrations in a technical sense, one can see the influence of surrealism in the chaotic organization of the pictures and further see the carnival element of animalism and primal human nature in the features of the characters. Philip Nel, in his book *The Avant-Garde and Postmodernity: Small Incisive Shocks*, associates many of the pictures of Seuss books with innovative icons of his time. For example, his machines pay tribute to the unique Rube Goldberg and his buildings reflect the amplification of the landscape, something unimportant to the bourgeois, as attributed to architect Antonio Gaudi (Mason). Seussian illustrations are slippery, full of twists and turns; that is precisely the effect Geisel worked for – a carnival touch to slip away from the bourgeois repression.

Perhaps the most effective technique of inserting the fragments of the carnival which Geisel used are the subliminal messages included in all of his stories. Many adults would be surprised to learn that each of the beloved stories of Dr. Seuss that they read as a child had a specific point which it was trying to submerge into the minds of young children. Many more adults would be angered at the messages which Geisel was spreading: environmentalism, revolts against authority, diversity, and a parody of President Reagan's arms race. *The Lorax* (1971) tells the story of the Once-ler who cut down all the truffula trees and ruined the land – a critique of environmental destruction. *The Butter Battle* (1984) is a lampoon of Reagan's arms race. *The Sneetches* (1961), perhaps the most obvious message, is bluntly stating the effects of a negative outlook on diversity, a child's recitation of the Holocaust. Most frightening to a bourgeois parent are *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949) and *Yertle the Turtle* (1958) which are both about rulers imposing their will on their subjects and reflect Geisel's encouragement to question authority. For example, in *Yertle the Turtle* (1958), the ruler attempts to build his throne on the back of his subjects, and the turtle, Mack, on the bottom says, "I know, up on top you are seeing great sights,/ But down at the bottom we, too, should have rights." (Mason). This is a message which bourgeois parents would not want their children hearing: the notion of questioning authority such as parents and higher classes, or of doing anything less than being the structure of an organized hierarchy and submitting to it so they rise in the power struggle.

Not only do the subliminal messages which Geisel included

teach messages of celebration and merriment, individuality and creativity that need to be harnessed to prevent revolution, but further, these messages are things which the bourgeois simply do not want to consider, ideas which are simply too vulgar and grotesque for them to accept. The bourgeois do not want to genuinely care about environmentalism or the effects on our earth, they don't want to persistently worry about an arms race and the fate of humanity. They, further, do not want to concern themselves with diversity, dealing with others different from them. The ramifications of doing any one of these things would pull them down from their lofted, superior position and the power their social class holds. Only pagan, festive people would deal with these crude problems. Geisel works to force all people to think about these issues in the subliminal messages of his stories, he forces the carnivalesque into children's lives through his literature. Theodore Geisel, through words, pictures, and stories, allowed a child to connect to the carnivalesque nature that is natural to humans. We return to what Freud dubbed 'clownism,' what is actually the carnival, "the imitation of animals and circus scenes...they seek their satisfaction to the accompaniment of the craziest capers, somersaults and grimaces'" (Stallybrass 101). The carnival, what the bourgeois called the grotesque, is all this 'clownism' precisely in the very language and illustration that develops the sublime story in the Seussian universe.

The bourgeois hysteria that developed as the classes emerged through industrialization drove the upper class to stifle this carnival nature of the working class for the reasons we have explored: "Carnival was too disgusting for bourgeois life to endure...it contained a promiscuous loss of status and decorum which the bourgeoisie had to deny as abhorrent in order to emerge as a distinct and 'proper' class," (Stallybrass 105). In order to ensure that the carnival and its participants did not reemerge with strength and zeal, the bourgeois muffled the festival, and that which is marked with a festival nature, through fragmentation, marginalization, repression, and sublimation. The works of Theodore Geisel, which were highly skilled in implementing the shreds of the carnival, experienced this oppression as well. They both contained the grotesque which the bourgeois could not endure if they wished to maintain their status, and they also were the supposed stop in productive learning which their class detested. Thus emerged methods for crushing the carnivalesque, Dr. Seuss.

The observable method of fragmentation in the works of Theodore Geisel comes as an attempt to fragment anything that might contain an element of vulgar gaiety. Fragmentation, oppression by separation, would not allow Geisel's work to contain the entire nature of the carnival in one work, instead it must be subliminally hidden in



the story and pictures. Notice that intermixed with the creatures of Seuss you can often find a “normal” human or pet. Further, a story can only contain one aspect of the carnival. Geisel cannot both embrace diversity and criticize authority. In *The Sneetches* (1961) he is able to contain an aspect of diversity and acceptance, but it requires a separate book, *Yertle the Turtle* (1958), to discuss a critique on authority. “During suppression...there was a tendency for the basic mixture to break down, certain elements becoming separated from others...the grotesque body was fragmented.” (Stallybrass 103). Dr. Seuss could not completely force a child into a return to their uninhibited human nature when he could only include certain aspects of the carnival, shreds. The carnival was torn from itself – a picture mixed in with the accepted normal, a few strange changes in language amongst an entire story. This fragmenting of the books forced a suppression of the carnival in the Seussian universe where the carnival never came out full force, but only piece by piece.

One of the most obvious methods of containment of the carnival that is noted in Dr. Seuss books is that of marginalization. The books were typically read by children of the working class and rarely recommended by the likes of a librarian or educator as detailed previously, for they are “destined to remain to wallow in ‘their beer, their gin, and their fun,’” (Storey 17). Why else would anyone read a Dr. Seuss work, other than for fun? That is precisely the attitude which marginalized the work of Dr. Seuss. Only those who wallow in fun would read Seuss, would take a break from productive educational reading. “Part of the process was...the ‘disowning’ of carnival and its symbolic resources, a gradual reconstruction of the idea of carnival as the culture of the Other,” (Stallybrass 103). Dr. Seuss became marginalized. Only a working class person who did not require education or culture, who had not evolved as far as the bourgeois or had no need for their culture of traditional, strict education, would still relent to this animalistic and grotesque literature of entertainment. Dr. Seuss, along with sitcoms, romance novels, and pop music, was of no intellectual value, but instead entertainment that only “those people” needed. The carnival, once again, was suppressed through the wide spread belief that only those of Other, those working class people who didn’t require traditional cultured edification would read something such as Dr. Seuss which contains this festive nature. Tied directly to this is the system of repression which also subdued the carnivalesque. That which was marginalized was what the bourgeois should avoid: they would not participate in something that only the Other employs. They must repress this grotesque, everything unusual and difficult to consider. Dr. Seuss contained exactly that, the unusual, extraordinary things which were not often reflected on and were highly

disregarded. Geisel placed animal nature at the forefront through the creatures he used as characters, he challenged communication by bearing disdain for its foundation, and he ensured those things least important to the bourgeois – environmentalism, diversity – made it to the forefront through the sublime messages in his stories. But these stories were marginalized, only used by the Other. It followed that, “all that which the proper bourgeois must strive not to be in order to preserve a stable ‘correct’ sense of self,” was that which was utilized by the Other (Stallybrass 104). By treating that which was marginalized, in this case the carnivalesque of Dr. Seuss, with disdain, then the bourgeois effectively repressed that which was marginalized as well.

Once the bourgeois had effectively restrained the carnivalesque through fragmentation, marginalization, and repression, it remained to pervade society but in a subtle way: through sublimation and subtle shreds of carnival surfacing in unexpected places, like a book. The Seussian universe is the sublime remains of the carnival as it lingers today. The carnival, of course, cannot be outright, obvious, or accepted as it is suppressed, so the sublime is that which still brings pieces of the carnival to permeate society. “The disjecta membra of the grotesque body of carnival found curious lodgement throughout the whole social order of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century... and this involved a degree of unpredictability in moment and surface of emergence. The ‘carnivalesque’ might erupt from the literary text,” (Stallybrass 105). While in the books of Theodore Geisel readers may observe only shreds of the carnival, these texts, like everything else festive, have experienced fragmentation, marginalization, and repression. The simple notion that the carnival may be observed here is precisely what makes the literature of Dr. Seuss a sublime remembrance of the carnivalesque.

A return to the Seussian universe is perhaps the best way to conclude. In *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), Dr. Seuss wrote, “You will see something new. / Two things. And I call them / Thing One and Thing Two.” In his text of a jovial and festive nature, Theodore Geisel presents the theory of Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnivalesque. We see something new: the emergence of the bourgeois who will create a whole new lifestyle void of festivity and above the vulgarity of that which constitutes the Other. Call it thing one or thing two, for that is the irony, the Other will always be there, and we must have two things, for the Other – our sheer childlike enjoyment of Dr. Seuss – the festive, the pagan, the carnival, will never leave the new. And that, my friend, is why we find ourselves in the Seussian universe.

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