

The Semiotics of Children's Stationery

Porch Lagersthwaite, Montreal, October 2019

Gone are the days when, as Roland Barthes put it, “semiology remains a tentative science” (Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 1964). The semiotic project has been concluded in fields as diverse as archaeology (Levi-Strauss, 1955), psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1966), and placards on British public toilets (Lagersthwaite, to appear). Yet there remains untilled ground to till, most notably in quotidian fields too prosaic to interest overweening academicians who confine the semiotic enterprise to areas of little practical import.

Children's stationery has thus understandably escaped the attention of practicing semioticians and semiologists for decades. As Barthes notes, “there is no language without speech, and no speech outside language” (Barthes, 1964), and similarly there are no children without stationery, and no stationery without children. The “reciprocal comprehensiveness” (*ibid.*) that obtains between language and speech similarly obtains between children and stationery, and by unveiling the underlying codes that bind stationery and its corresponding children we can unveil the post-dialectic interplay between language and speech itself.

As Jean-Francois Lyotard points out, “society... progresses only if the messages circulating within it are rich in information and easy to decode” (Lyotard, 1979). One inescapable feature of children's stationery is that children understand it. So its operative principles are unlikely to elude the grasp of this perspicacious examiner, and the facility with which we ‘decode its messages’ will meaningfully contribute to this social progress Lyotard so cogently describes.

Acknowledging the central place of *différance* (Derrida, 1963) in any structuralist analysis, the examination will proceed by considering a panoply of examples. We may thus *defer* drawing conclusions until we see how these examples *differ*, wherein we may discover the essential aporia. Illuminating is the QingLanJian Creative Lovely Animal Style Writing Stationary Paper Letter Set (amazon.com). One immediately notices the willful misspelling of “Stationery”, a conscious imitation of Derrida's respelling of *différence* as *différance*. This stationery is poststructuralist catnip, our castle in Spain, a code created specifically so we might enjoy the pleasure of deciphering it. The product description reveals clues to the semiotic principles behind the stationery's design: “**Random** 4 different styles stationary set”, trumpets the advertising copy (emphasis added). As Baudrillard astutely observes, “you cannot beat randomness with finality, you cannot beat programmed dispersion with *prises de conscience* or dialectical transcendence, you cannot defend against the code with political economy or ‘revolution’ ” (Baudrillard, 1976). It is this insuperable randomness, ubiquitous in children's stationery, that conveys to children the futility of *prises de conscience*, revolution, and whatever dialectical efforts the child might expend to apprehend the surrounding world. This is an early stage of a process of Foucauldian normalization (Foucault, 1975) serving to condition behaviour, suppress revolutionary impulses among preteens, and discourage them from *prises de conscience* (whether this means “developing a conscience”, or “raising consciousness” or something else altogether is not clear to this author, but the precise meaning of the phrase can presumably be understood from the context in which it is used). Thus children's stationery plays an ataractic role, confining behaviour, limiting deviation, allowing capitalist and subsequently post-capitalist society to flourish without dysfunction. For children, “the entire process appears to emanate from this recording surface. Society constructs its own delirium” (Deleuze/Guattari, 1972) (it is purely the interpretation of the present author that Deleuze and Guattari were referring to children's stationery when discussing

“recording surfaces”; it is generally unclear what Deleuze and Guattari are talking about most of the time, to wit the perplexing “the production of recording itself is produced by the production of production” (Deleuze/Guattari, 1972)).

Comparing the QingLanJian product with the SCStyle Cute Lovely Kawaii Special Design Writing Stationery Paper (amazon.com) we again discover a stochastic process: “Color: as the picture shows(**randomly** color sent)” (emphasis added). A second feature of both the QingLanJian and SCStyle products is the presence of *lines*. These reinforce the Lyotardian metanarrative of progress, the restrictive paradigm of logical and linear thought, repressing the child’s natural instinct to rebel, to “colour outside the lines” (citation omitted). As Braidotti explains, “the heteroglossia of data we are confronted with demands complex topologies of knowledge... We consequently need to adopt non-linearity to develop cartographies of power that account for the paradoxes of the posthuman era” (Rosi Braidotti, 2013). Not only is children’s stationery *linear* but the lines are *parallel*. Following Habermas, Nancy Fraser observes that “parallel exchange processes link the ‘public sphere’ and the state system” (Fraser, 1985), and this very parallelism is echoed in the notepaper children use daily (and without which, as observed previously, children would not exist). It is telling that children have, in capitalist society, rarely organized themselves to form a “subaltern counterpublic”, in Fraser’s terms.

It remains to consider the iconography of children’s stationery. The 3C4G 36015 Best Day Ever Super Stationery Set (amazon.com) pages display a mobile phone’s LCD screen. The QingLanJian pages portray animals of indeterminate species. The SCStyle pages show sailboats. These share one common feature: they reinforce consumer desire, for, respectively, new technologies, exotic pets, and expensive yachts. Children’s stationery is thus just one cog in a machine which produces *desiring-production*, in the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari, who offer an attendant warning: “there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors” (Deleuze/Guattari, 1972). Thus, while children’s stationery, as this semiotic analysis has revealed, plays a central role in reinforcing conformity, suppressing revolutionary impulse, and preventing the formation of subaltern counterpublics that could overthrow the prevailing world order, paradoxically, if the development of children’s stationery is left unchecked, the demolition of society could result.