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# The Nutcracker: Waltzing with Tradition

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*The Nutcracker* ballet was born in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Imperial Russia. It was a production of ballet's classic figures, Tchaikovsky, Petipa, Ivanov, illustrious at the time and still celebrated more than one hundred years later. *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, a fantastic, but dark and rather eerie short story by German children's writer E. T. Hoffmann was translated into French by Alexander Dumas and from there translated into the ballet scenario that became working script for choreographer Marius Petipa and his assistant Lev Ivanov. Hoffman's psychologically complex manuscript was a rather odd choice for a ballet intended as an entertaining finale to the performance of a full-length, serious opera, the standard programming sequence for St. Petersburg's cultured audiences. The ballet that premiered December 6, 1892 in St. Petersburg tells the story of a young girl who receives a wooden Nutcracker from her mysterious but kindly godfather during a family Christmas party. She is astonished to find, late in the night after the party has ended, that her Nutcracker has come alive and is doing battle with an army of evil mice led by the Mouse King. Her reward for aiding the Nutcracker in battle constitutes the second act; a fantastic journey through the Land of Snow to the Land of the Sweets where various sugary concoctions perform for her, culminating in the pas de deux of the Sugar Plum fairy and her handsome consort. The hallmarks of the ballet are Tchaikovsky's delicate and melodic score (in particular his use of a novel instrument, the celestica), the centrality of Christmas Eve (and indeed the Christmas tree) to the setting of the first

act, and the sensory extravaganza of the second act: the colour, diversity, and fantastic characters that animate the fantasy lands.

Ballet historian Roland John Wiley notes that *The Nutcracker* had a few successes, but overall “did not play well during its first eight years” (1997, 147). And Lynn Garafola argues for a performance history that is sporadic and unevenly received from *The Nutcracker’s* inception until a 1944 San Francisco production that emphasized spectacle and featured child performers in several roles. The burgeoning interest this presentation created culminated in the 1954 New York production by renowned choreographer, George Balanchine. Balanchine’s production is generally acknowledged to be the crystallization of *The Nutcracker* as popular artifact and the official start date of the North American *Nutcracker* ‘epidemic’: the annual and enormously successful performance of *The Nutcracker* ballet in various versions by many, many companies, large and small, across all of North America.<sup>i</sup>

A celebration of children, sensory excess and seasonal return, *The Nutcracker* waltzes with venerable Christmas traditions, but is, as a popular phenomenon, much younger than its dance partners. This paper examines the ballet’s move from obscurity to celebrity. I argue that hallowed symbols of modernity are articulated in *The Nutcracker* and subsequently orchestrated into an expression of public sacrality by the surrounding media discourse. The appeal of this mediated religiosity for pluralistic, contemporary audiences is a significant factor in the Nut’s emergence and endurance as a popular artifact.

My argument is indebted to scholar Robert White’s assertion that the cultural dramaturgy of contemporary media is an apt site for the negotiation of sacred symbols and identities, both individual and communal. White argues that media and religion function similarly, reflexively, as “discourses that monitor, evaluate, and orient the integrated development of cultures” (1997, 40). He notes the propensity of current religious studies scholarship to find religious expression and phenomena in myriad social contexts and formations. Religious discourse, he argues, is a central component of society’s synthesized representation of core symbols

and therefore is rarely absent from cultural negotiations (43). However, he claims, the public sphere is conflicted in a postmodern era of radical cultural pluralism. There is both “an affirmation of the need and the right to project diverse value identities in the public sphere” and a demand “for negotiated cultural consensus in which all persons and subcultures can immediately recognize something of their identities” (40). “In an era of radical pluralism that is suspicious of civil religions and equally suspicious of denominational revivals and other cultural revitalization movements”, White presses for the media as a premium ritual space for the negotiation of the religious and the sacred in the public sphere (61). “The media invite all cultural fronts to be present in a time-out context when our dogmatic purist identities are most permeable and we are in festive mood, ready to discover something of our common sacred archetypes in the sacred symbols of all” (61).

*The Nutcracker's* manifestation as a contemporary Christmas icon has its genesis in The Nut's striking ability to conjoin varied, and sometimes opposing, aspects of contemporary society. As White suggests, religious discourse in the media is not necessarily an invocation of the sacred, but a new or reconsidered articulation of the dialogue between the sacred and the secular (1997, 51). In its many boundary crossings, *The Nutcracker* choreographs that dialogue as an intimate dance. *The Nutcracker* is both Christmas ritual and secular theatre, both elite dance form and mainstream entertainment, both triumphant 20<sup>th</sup> century spectacle and enduring family festival. This ability to waltz in the public sphere with various partners and a plurality of sacred symbols makes the *Nutcracker* a particularly suitable (and therefore popular) medium for religio-cultural negotiation in a postmodernist context of radical cultural pluralism.

A century old Russian ballet based on a children's story, which played to neither critical nor popular acclaim at its inception, has become the staple of late 20<sup>th</sup> century North American ballet companies and a fixture on the contemporary Christmas scene. The incongruity has not escaped dance aficionados, Nut audiences, or the popular press. Their attempts to explain the Nut's 20th century resurgence focus on three aspects of the ballet: the

centrality of children, the spectacular elements, and the association, both inherent and created, with Christmas. These three are not unrelated; indeed, children and the spectacular are dominant motifs amidst the contested meanings of Christmas. Scholars argue that Christmas as we know it, the modern pastiche of Santa Claus, shopping, angels, ornaments and the Christchild in the manger, took shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *The Nutcracker's* celebration of kids, both on stage and off, participates in the religion of domesticity central to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christmas whereas spectacle in *The Nutcracker* references an age-old understanding of Christmas as a mid-winter festival of abundance and inversion.

Populating both sides of the footlights and central to the baller's plot, children are multi-faceted players in the pageant of *The Nutcracker*. As an audience they constitute an important market for a ballet that sustains many companies economically (O'Neil 1984, C16). Marketing campaigns, such as the distribution of Nutcracker ticket order forms in public schools, simultaneously capitalize on and cultivate a youthful audience (National Ballet Newsletter 1963, 4). As primary consumers of *The Nutcracker*, children shape the artistic interpretation, the advertising and the critical reception of the ballet.

As entertainers, children have a unique relationship to *The Nutcracker*. Their presence on stage certainly contributes to the financial success of the ballet, parents and friends are assured ticket buyers and the appeal of youth extends to segments of the general public.<sup>ii</sup> But in addition to their economic importance, child performers may proffer ritual significance. The girls selected to play Clara are invariably of an age bordering on adulthood and performing the role can be interpreted as a transition, as a ritual rite of passage to adulthood. Sexual development and increasing height automatically put an end to one's suitability for the child roles. One former 'Nutcracker kid' recalled a dread of "filling out", "growing taller" and "maturing" for it meant the end of her ballet affiliation (Gilford 1983, HC19). "For all the children who played Clara, the experience marks a turning point, the final year or two of childhood when life still holds visions of sugarplums" (Gilford 1984, HC23). The claim is overstated, but it does attest to a possible liminal interpretation of

the meaning of Clara and the double initiation the role can serve – into the world of ballet and into the world of adults.

On stage, the child centred plot prompts dance scholar James Neufeld to state that the pervasive subtext of *The Nutcracker* is “the deep, sometimes tortured, never insignificant relationship between the worlds of children and of adults” (1996, 275). That relationship, argues historian Stephen Nissenbaum, underwent a revolution in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century children were merely dependents—miniature adults who occupied the bottom of the hierarchy within the family, along with the servants,” Nissenbaum writes (1996, 62). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christmas provided both backdrop and building block for the introduction of children as a distinct social category.

In an exhaustive study, Nissenbaum traces the carnival roots of Christmas and explores their domestication in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a domestication that ushers in a novel notion of the child and an attendant “new faith” (1996, 48). *The Battle for Christmas* outlines the pagan origins of unruly mid-winter solstice celebrations and the common rituals of social inversion that accompanied the Christmas season in early modern Europe. At the insistent and sometimes aggressive ritual prompting of the poor, prosperous and powerful people were expected to offer the fruits of their harvest bounty to their poorer neighbors and dependents. In the colonies, Christmas survives the Puritan rejection of anything vaguely Catholic or excessive and returns to late 18<sup>th</sup> century New England in varied garb, ranging from pious devotion to misrule and carnival, but still devoid of intimate family gatherings, presents to expectant children, trees, reindeer or Santa Claus. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, removed from the confines of an agrarian, gentrified, paternal social structure, the carnival Christmas traditions of wassail, misrule and callithupian ‘street theater’ took on ominous tones of social protest. The gentry withdrew from the streets and moved into their homes, where the patron-client exchange could be translated from one between the classes to one between the generations. Nissenbaum states

The children of a single household had replaced a larger group of the poor and powerless as the symbolic objects of charity and benevolence.

It was those children who became the temporary centers of attention and deference at Christmas, and the joy and gratitude on their faces and in their voices as they opened their presents was a vivid re-creation of the exchange of gifts for goodwill that had long constituted the emotional heart of the Christmas season (62).

“It was the isolation of children from other dependents at Christmas that produced—that *was*—the domestication of the holiday,” he concludes (112).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century legacy of a domestic Christmas, with the child as central recipient of the householders’ largesse, is recreated on the *Nutcracker* stage and frequently reflected in its audiences. The first act of *The Nutcracker* is almost always set in the home of an upper middle-class 19<sup>th</sup> century German family, at the scene of their family Christmas party, a party closed to intruders. Gifts from Clara’s godfather generate both excitement and squabbling amidst the dependents. On the other side of the footlights, children typically attend the ballet with parents or other relatives. *Nutcracker* performances almost always take place during the Christmas season, and the ticket stub held firmly in young hands often arrives as a gift. This ‘family entertainment,’ as the advertisements tout it, cements the bonds of family, celebrates parental benevolence and youthful appreciation, and underscores the family’s central position in society. The “religion of domesticity” has perhaps gained ground in the last hundred years, careening the child to a place of prominence even in the world of art.<sup>iii</sup> A 19<sup>th</sup> century reviewer sniffed that “the new ballet is produced primarily with children for children, and for everything that can have value in their eyes as regards external brilliance” (Wiley 1997, 140). His 20<sup>th</sup> century equivalent remarked “the children in this production – and there are many – are what make the show” (Globe & Mail 1984). Perhaps *The Nutcracker*’s rise to prominence in the middle of this century is intimately related to the social history of the 1950’s. Doug Owsen argues that both the demographics of the baby boom generation and the wartime experiences of boomer parents ensured that “the society of mid-century remained a child-centred one, ‘filiocentric,’ as the sociologists termed it” (1996, 51).<sup>iv</sup> Certainly, *The Nutcracker*’s continued popularity speaks to the longevity of the child-centred Christmas, the allure of the religion of domesticity.

But if the child stands centre stage in *The Nutcracker*, so too does the Christmas tree, a magical tree that grows to stupendous heights at the close of the first act as Clara prepares to be transported to the fantasy lands. The tree is emblematic of the 'spectacle' of the Nut, a feature frequently lamented but readily acknowledged as essential to the Nutcracker's popularity. "But in any case, to repeat, *The Nutcracker* cannot pretend to be a ballet, but constitutes 'spectacle'... For our first class ballet the production of such 'spectacles' is an insult" (Wiley 1997, 141). The assessment of this 1892 critic, considerably harsher and in no way tinged with nostalgia, nevertheless has its counterpart in many modern critiques of *The Nutcracker*. National Ballet of Canada historian, James Neufeld, refers to the company's move to the "spectacular ballets" of the classical repertoire upon its residency in the O'Keefe Centre in 1964 (1996, 70). And of these classical ballets he figures *The Nutcracker* as "probably the least substantial of the surviving Petipa ballets" (98). American writer Nicole Dekle, trying to explain the North American Nutcracker phenomenon, placed her emphasis squarely on the factor that had so enraged *The Nutcracker's* earliest critics: "The spectacular effects are clearly a reason that people keep returning to *The Nutcracker*," she writes (1992, 53). Rather than a scathing indictment of the entire ballet, Dekle calls attention to specific 'spectacular' elements common to the vast majority of Nutcracker productions: the first act Christmas tree that magically grows to enormous heights, the manufactured snow that falls across the stage as Clara and the Nutcracker make their journey to the Land of the Sweets, and the fantastic characters of the second act.

There are enough suggestions of grotesque realism, of the liminal, of the body in the spectacles of *The Nutcracker* to consider (but certainly not to conclude) that *The Nutcracker* is an instance of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and by extension a revival of the carnival Christmas: the tradition of leisure, revelry, celebratory excess and misrule that marked the pre-Christian solstice celebrations, confounded the Christian advocates of a temperate Christmas, and continues to colour Christmas festivities to this day. The spectacular characters of the second act are drawn not from Hoffman's original creation but from popular theatre (Dekle 1992, 53).

Mere Gigogne, portrayed (often by a man) as a gigantic figure whose enormous hoop skirts lift to reveal a plethora of children hiding underneath, is drawn from 18<sup>th</sup> century puppet theatre. There she is the wife of a gadabout, the mother of so many children she cannot count them. The grotesque images of grandiose body, of exaggerated fertility, of growth and a brimming over abundance are certainly present in Mere Gigogne. The magical transformations – the expanding tree, the vivified toys, the dancing candies – and the fantasy kingdoms suggest the reversal of usual order and the establishing of a second and non-official world. The pirouetting gumdrops and capering candy canes may be more than mere “frothy concoctions,” asserts Kuznets. She argues, “gourmet and gourmand details constitute a layer of disguise in many children’s books, standing in for all id impulses, and sometimes... substituting oral for genital desires” (1994, 64).

It is intriguing that as the domestic Christmas unfolded in the drawing rooms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century middle class, the carnival Christmas frequently took up lodgings in the theatre. Special Christmas productions were well established by the 1840s. They tended to be especially exaggerated, burlesque affairs complemented by an equally raucous audience given to shouting responses to the lines delivered on stage and lobbing objects at the actors (Nissenbaum 1996, 123). Leigh Schmidt makes the important point that holiday attractions maintained the energy and images of the festival of the street, but nevertheless transformed it: from all male free-for-all to spectated carnival, available for the price of admission. Nissenbaum argues that the carnival Christmas not only dictated Christmas theatre offerings but also established the credentials for bona fide Christmas present. The hallmarks of plenty and indulgence that denote the carnival Christmas had been translated to mean, in agrarian times, “not bread and beer, but cakes and ale” (1996, 139). The agricultural cycle was largely eroded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet late December was still associated with letting go, with splurging, with overindulgence in luxuries. In an urban and capitalistic setting, these associations ensured that Christmas present meant fancy good.



*The Nutcracker* follows the choreography of the 19<sup>th</sup> century carnival Christmas rather flawlessly. Its fantastic characters, startling effects and outlandish fantasies place it squarely in the tradition of Christmas theatre spectacles. As Schmidt notes, this is commodified carnival, not carnival culture. One buys a ticket. And if the image of the denizens of the ballet world standing on their seats, hollering hooligan slogans and hurling their handbags seems entirely askew, it is because ballet is consumed as a 'fancy' good. One revels in velvet gowns, thick carpets, beautiful ballerinas and best suits. Ostentatious and outlandish, *The Nutcracker* dances on both sides of the carnival Christmas coin.

How is it that *The Nutcracker* can simultaneously celebrate carnival and domesticity? An answer is suggested in John MacAloon's discussion of ramified performance genres and his intriguing theory of spectacle. His theory also points toward a rationale for the tepid reception of the Nut in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its fanfare in the 20<sup>th</sup>. In his own research on the Olympic Games, MacAloon noted that the Games could not be categorized as a singular performance type. They were, rather, an amalgam of distinctive, yet interrelated, genres of cultural performance (spectacle, festival, rite, game) that he termed a 'ramified performance'. He argued that although spectacle and festival are theoretically opposed to one another, in a ramified performance they work in concert to frame some more discrete performative genre (such as dance or games).

Though bereft of scholarly attention, certain features of the spectacle genre can be established, MacAloon contends. "Spectacles give primacy to visual sensory and symbolic codes; they are things to be seen," he states (1984, 243). Not all sights are spectacles, MacAloon notes, only those which appeal or intend to appeal to the eye by their mass, proportions, colour or other dramatic qualities; by what might arguably be called their abundance. Unlike ritual, which may or may not require an audience, or where audience might be a misnomer, spectacle institutionalizes the bicameral roles of actors and audience. Spectacle is optional; nothing is required of the audience beyond observation. Lastly, MacAloon claims, spectacle is a dynamic form. It demands "movement, action, change, and exchange on the part of the human actors who are

center stage” and excites those who witness it, although that excitement may surface as a diffuse wonder or awe and need not be charged with a distinct style or mood (243). In this sense, spectacle is radically differentiated from festival, which connotes very specifically, ‘festive’ or joyous mood. Traditional festival is distinguished by symmetries of balance, harmony and duration. It is happily anticipated whereas spectacles may be received with suspicion.

It is helpful to sort out (though impossible to completely separate) *The Nutcracker’s* performance as spectacle and its performance as festival. Theatre dance is unquestionably a dynamic form, one that privileges the visual, one that insists on a rigid separation of spectator and performer. *The Nutcracker*, with its ‘external brilliance’ and fantastical abundance, completes the spectacle performance code in a way that other more austere dance fare may not. Yet the perception frequently encouraged by Nutcracker officials, and indeed attested to by many devotees, is that attendance at the Nut qualifies as participation in a festival, not consumption of a spectacle. “Enchanting Fairytale,” “Holiday Treat,” “Holiday Tradition for the Entire Family,” trumpet the advertisements, making the case for joyous festivity, familial harmony, enduring celebration. *The Nutcracker’s* annual return marks its stability. “Nutcracker audiences will always outnumber other dance audiences,” states one observer. “Attending *The Nutcracker* is a ritual, a habit, a tradition” (O’Neil 1984, HC20). *The Nutcracker’s* performance tradition is not more than fifty years old, but the ballet itself has a classical pedigree that embellishes what might otherwise be interpreted as fledgling festival at best.<sup>v</sup>

*The Nutcracker’s* successful cultivation of the cultural performance genres of both spectacle and festival enables its dual presentations of carnival and domestic Christmas. While the domestic, child-centred gaze of the baby boom generation may account for its emergence as a popular icon, it may be *The Nutcracker* as spectacle that generates its continued prominence. MacAloon argues for the growth, possibly even the triumph, of the spectacle genre in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “From a subjective standpoint, the world has not shrunk,” he elaborates, “it has immeasurably expanded.

Spectacle may be that genre which most reflects and refracts this social expansion, this extension of vision, this opening of the 'eye'" (1984, 267). If spectacle makes sense in our century, modern audiences may comprehend *The Nutcracker* in ways their 19<sup>th</sup> century counterparts could not. Journalist Rachel Rafelman's discussion of contemporary theatre in Toronto implicitly notes the aggrandizing ethos of the spectacle and its subtle dismantling of festival.

In the theatre of the nineties, where audiences have grown to expect helicopter landings, giant crashing chandeliers, flying pinball machines and levitating 36,000 pound mansions, an expanding sandwich-board Christmas tree no longer qualifies as a 'special' effect. Last Christmas, when the National Ballet trotted out its old showstopper, several pint-sized patrons could scarcely be bothered to look up from their Game Gears (1995, 52).

When the NBC's reimagined Nutcracker appeared in 1995, sporting more colour, more elaborate costumes and more spectacular special effects, Rafelman advised, "kids better leave their Game Gears at home or risk missing the thrills" (52). The spectacle genre inheres in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, MacAloon argues, because it plays with and participates in the question that permeates modernity, the troubling relationship between image and reality. "The spectacle produces and consists of images," he writes, "and the triangular relationship between the spectacle, its contents and its contextual culture is 'about' the relationship between image and reality, appearing and being" (1984, 270).

Undeniably, *The Nutcracker* invokes a variety of related and contrasting sacred symbols.<sup>vi</sup> There is the child-centered Christmas that Nissenbaum touts as the "religion of domesticity", the "new faith" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its attendant focus on the family and the home. There is the carnival Christmas, the domain of, as Schmidt calls them, "perennial bacchanalians", with its attendant focus on abundance and inversion and the dissolution of hierarchies. There is the consumption of that carnival, the consumer Christmas. Schmidt claims shopping and gift giving emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as "secular liturgies" (1995, 58).

This is more than an intriguing mix. As White notes, the religious and the media are reflexive discourses; they monitor and orient cultural

development. Clifford Geertz points to something similar in the cultural dramaturgy of Balinese cockfights – such scripts simultaneously relate and create who we are (1991 [1969]). White's point is that in a pluralistic, postmodern era popular cultural dramas cannot perform a singular narrative of who and how we are, a multi-faceted account encompassing varied cultural fronts is demanded. *The Nutcracker* skillfully blends alternate assessments of contemporary culture. Modernity as a stable, contained, fixed account of generations and familial bonds celebrated by enduring festival; modernity narrated by the spectacular as a condition of expansive flux, prone to inversions and reversals, rooted in an unstable relationship between image and reality.

But White claims that the pluralistic scripts and multiple sacred symbols seek, in the public sphere, some resolution. Media and religion in the public sphere seek “to discover something of our common sacred archetypes in the sacred symbols of all” (1997, 61). The media discourse that surrounds the *Nutcracker* performance works diligently to knit a ‘common’ sacrality that the public might carry home with their programmes. To do this the media relies heavily on constructed memories of Christmas and on the child as a symbol of *communitas*.

*The Nutcracker* Christmas inherent to the script and *The Nutcracker* Christmas created in the discourse of critics and journalists, producers and advertisers are both involved in the manufacture of nostalgia, the construction of memory. The staged Christmas stimulates a specific nostalgia: a white, middle class celebration of Victorian ethics of family, prosperity and propriety. *The Nutcracker* is almost always set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. The sets are opulent, the Christmas tree properly resplendent with glitter and gifts, the family warm and gay. The children are well dressed and well behaved. Even sibling squabbling is reduced to polite roughhousing. If the construction of memory is submerged in the text of the ballet, it is certainly excavated in the Christmas discourse that surrounds *The Nutcracker*. For example: “*The Nutcracker* is about growing up, something we all do. Everybody remembers feeling about Christmas

what Clara feels. It's still this magical story of a little girl's dream, of all of our dreams. And that is what makes it a classic" (O'Neil 1984, HC20). Of course everybody doesn't remember feeling about Christmas what Clara feels. Many people never celebrate Christmas. Many never celebrate in the affluent fashion Clara did. Many do not celebrate with European rituals and symbols. Very, very few can "remember" Christmases of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Little girl's dreams may not be little boy's dreams. But the exhortation of the writer is that we all can — drawing on a plethora of cultural materials and images — remember a Christmas like Clara's, even if it is a memory of fictitious events. This constructed memory of Christmas provides some of the common sacrality that surfaces from the 'sacred symbols of all'. Likewise, 'the child' in *The Nutcracker* and in the Nutcracker rhetoric is invoked as a symbol of *communitas*, something broadly and fundamentally human that draws on but supersedes pluralistic renditions of the sacred.

*Communitas* is Victor Turner's nomenclature for a specific type of social relations: social relations that belie the divisions and differentiation of normative social structures and recognize instead an essential and generic human bond. This generic human bond is what is celebrated in the sentiment that *The Nutcracker* is "about growing up, *something we all do*", in the notion that dreams are shared by humanity, not differentiated by gender. Turner speaks at length of symbolic figures, invariably of low status or position that model or incite the moral values of *communitas*. He cites as examples beggars, lepers, simpletons, "who strip off the pretensions of holders of high rank and office and reduce them to the level of common humanity and morality" (1996, 78). Or, as the formula is frequently translated, 'make them as children'. Turner draws his examples from folk literature, literature that predates the 19<sup>th</sup> century where Nissenbaum argues a fundamental substitution was made: children replaced a larger group of the poor and powerless as the symbolic objects of charity and benevolence. With the refashioning of Christmas celebrations, the revision of social hierarchies, the evolution of a religion of domesticity, children become important and prevalent symbols of liminality and *communitas*. Viewed from the vantage point of the adult the child is seen to be pre-

normative constraints, hence innocent, luminous by virtue of being on the margins of society. Scholar Elizabeth Pleck writes,

The idea of family holidays being for children fit with the Victorians' belief in the innocence of the child...the child was viewed less as an economic asset or insurance policy against destitution in old age and more as repository of the virtues adults had to abandon as they took on a heavy load of responsibilities and worries (2000, 47).

Clara, *The Nutcracker's* child heroine, becomes a time betwixt and between, or more precisely a time before, the imposition of structures and norms. She dances the character of 20<sup>th</sup> century *communitas*.

Yet much of the performance takes place off stage, in the media devoted to documenting both the *Nutcracker* performance and the Nut epidemic. It is important to remember that the collective *Nutcracker* proclamations ["everybody remembers feeling about Christmas what Clara feels," "for all the children who played Clara, the experience marks a turning point," "*The Nutcracker* is about growing up, something we all do," "the children in this production...are what make the show"] are not drawn from ethnographic reports or audience surveys. They are gleaned from dance trade journals, popular magazines, newspaper articles, and paid advertisements. What that most forcefully underscores is the concerted effort of the media to draw a common sacrality, a spirit of *communitas*, from *The Nutcracker's* archetypal child. Much as Sinclair-Faulkner points to hockey's 'ecclesia' — sportswriters, coaches and league administrators — as the guardians of the symbolic universe that prevails in Canadian hockey, the role of the media in advocating and developing *The Nutcracker's* sacred symbols into a religiosity for the public sphere cannot be underestimated. Clara, Christmas and childhood as symbolic of *communitas* is the preferred reading of the media. While it is undoubtedly a reading shared by many Nut attendees, it is naïve to consider audience experience without reference to the media discourse that surrounds and inculcates it.

Such naivete is prevalent in numerous articles about 20<sup>th</sup> century experiences of *communitas*.<sup>vii</sup> In the domain of ritual studies, the centrality of the individual and collective imagination to an experience of *communitas* has been displaced in favour of examinations of states and emotions generated by a press of bodies. This propensity is noted even when the performance explored is clearly ramified, media accentuated, and more liminoid than liminal. Scholars researching the *communitas* generated by modern large-scale festivals and other contemporary events have drawn, sometimes exclusively, on press reports to document their arguments about participants' genuine experience of *communitas* without questioning the role of the press in fostering, influencing, or advocating such an experience. Robert Rutherford's article about the spirit of *communitas* that pervaded Canadian crowds on the eve of World War I is a case in point. He argues the crowds that gathered to celebrate the 1914 declaration of war participated in a festival of war that marked a liminal threshold and an experience of *communitas*. Press accounts of these celebrations are a singular source. In Rutherford's assessment the press acts as a passive recorder of liminal moments and expressions of *communitas*. "*Echoes* of imagined communities, united by this festival of war, reverberated throughout the press", he writes (1996, 238).<sup>viii</sup> But what emerges clearly in his account is the active role the media played in encouraging certain behaviours and the deliberate interpretation of those behaviours as indicative of *communitas*. Newspaper offices posted late breaking news on electric bulletin boards or printed summaries prominently displayed on their premises. "...street and sidewalk areas in front of them drew the earliest of the August crowds, and often the largest," Rutherford notes, without explicitly acknowledging the importance of the press in fostering such gatherings (228). When the media reported on the sidewalk celebrations their inclination to view the gatherings as communal expressions of national unity is clear. "National unity was

expounded as the imperative of the hour, and rarely expressed dissent seemed all but drowned out", Rutherford writes (225). "Reminding readers of their connection, mythical or otherwise, to past traditions became a preoccupation, if not a fetish among journalists and editors...." (226).

Rutherford ultimately concludes that a genuine spirit of unity pervaded the crowds and that the press accurately reflected this *communitas*. What his account most effectively demonstrates, however, is that *the press* had an innate tendency to appraise and epitomize the August demonstrations as celebrations of national bonds, human spirit and liminal space. Why the media, both in Rutherford's example and in the discourse surrounding *The Nutcracker*, have a propensity to advocate and proclaim a spirit of *communitas* can only be suggested here. White's argument that the media consciously function as a reflexive discourse, anxious to synthesize pluralistic cultural fronts and multiple sacred symbols into a consecrated narrative delineating societal boundaries and bonds is one possible answer.<sup>ix</sup>

*The Nutcracker's* contemporary popularity suggests that the ballet's rich repertoire of sacred symbols, symbols of a spectacular Christmas that invoke carnival inversions, exaggerations and revered 'laughter of all', symbols of a domestic Christmas that exalts the sacrosanct dimensions of child, family and home, resonate with today's audiences. Its contemporary popularity also suggests that the media's expository narrative of our shared 'memories' of Christmas and our recognition of childhood as *communitas* compels public assent. *The Nutcracker's* status as modern Christmas icon inheres in its heterogeneous employment of key sacred archetypes of this era, and in the mediated weave of these heterogeneous archetypes into a quilt, rather than a sacred canopy, that covers a bed we are content to call common. The continual remaking of the bed is one function of the religious and the media in the public sphere.



## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Gunther Kodat argues back-to-back television broadcasts of Balanchine's *Nutcracker* in 1957 and 1958 were essential in establishing the *Nutcracker* as a national 'holiday tradition' and making the Balanchine production the definitive version of the work (2000, 6). *The Nutcracker's* North American popularity with ballet companies and with audiences is attested to in figures published in *Dance Magazine*. The phenomenon is first documented in Anderson 1966 and is revisited in Dekle 1992. O'Neil acknowledges *The Nutcracker* as "the biggest single moneymaker in professional dance" (1984, C16). Canada's first full-length production of *The Nutcracker* played to capacity audiences in 1964 and has been an extremely popular draw for the NBC every season since then (Neufeld 1996, 98). Annual sold out houses in Toronto were complemented by a touring production (sometimes in competition with the regional *Nutcracker* productions which sprang up quickly after 1964). Until 1989 *The Nutcracker* was the NBC's biggest and most consistent moneymaker. The original Franca version was employed every year until 1995 when slightly sagging ticket sales called, not for a moratorium, but a remake (*Toronto Life* December 1995, 50).

<sup>ii</sup> Although they agree on little else, *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail* reviews of *The Nutcracker* (December, 1984) both comment on the appeal of the child performers.

<sup>iii</sup> Nissenbaum employs this term extensively.

<sup>iv</sup> Gunther Kodat specifically links *The Nutcracker* to the social history of the 1950s arguing that Balanchine, familiar with the ballet as it had been performed in tsarist Russia, consciously revised his production of *The Nutcracker* to enshrine stable family life, a social arrangement that to Cold War America "seemed necessary for national security, civil defense and the struggle for supremacy over the Soviet Union" (2000, 3).

<sup>v</sup> Hobsbawm discusses the tendency of invented traditions to reference a largely fictitious continuity with a historic past. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983, 2).

- vi Unexplored here is the religious dimension of dance itself. See for example Paul Spencer (1985) and Linda Kent and Joanne Tucker (1996).
- vii In addition to Robert Rutherford (1996), see also Sylvia Rodriguez (1988).
- viii My italics.

ix see also Caroline Walker Bynum (1996 [1984]). If one considers mainstream media and the individual voices that compose it to represent an elite, then Bynum's argument that the elite have a special relationship to the structures of society and a special affinity to a dramatic interpretation that dissolves structure and upholds generic rather than hierarchical bonds compels consideration. See also Benedict Anderson (1983) who speaks at length about the importance of the media in perpetuating a viable conception of the community.

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