

## **The Concept "Toy" and Cultural Research**

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In Finland and Sweden, the 1980s discussions on the harmful influence that so-called military toys were said to have on children evoked a pronounced interest in the overall form and function of the toy in today's culture. The great collectors' interest in toys and recurring reports on rising auction prices for old toys have also contributed to making the subject topical. Critical voices maintain that today toys express the consumer society's predilection for fashion, meaning the predilection for change.

The "toy," as it is understood in public debate and in Western culture in general, is above all a product of the adults' view of children, of physical objects, and of children in relation to physical objects. This approach has developed simultaneously with the golden age of the European toy industry, between 1860 and 1930, a period when toys quite tangibly reflect the ideals of the bourgeois society. The toy is an object manufactured by adults, and it has one unequivocal function that the child is supposed to realize in play. This definition has coloured public consciousness, expositions, collections in museums, and scientific research. This goes to show how strong the impact of the adults' view of children's culture has been for over a hundred years.

I will start by discussing various ways of treating the toy in anthropologically-oriented cultural research. I will then, as cases in point, refer to studies on children's play in a modern urban environment in Finland. I will project this against a background of examples from earlier centuries. I will finish by discussing the concept "toy" in the adult world and in the world of the children. In my view the concept mirrors different aspects of the cultural pattern, on the one hand the position of children in society, on the other hand their position in culture. I dare maintain that children's culture, including the tools used in play in a way which expresses a specific type of formative creativity, has been generally overlooked. This opens up new vistas for both field studies and theoretical reasoning focusing on the cognitive dimensions of physical objects and on specific group cultures.

Toys were for the first time assembled as a group of their own at the Christmas exhibition of the Germanisches National museum in Nuremberg in the 1890s. As late as the 1880s, dolls, for instance, had been put on show as part of the costumes exhibition. The spread of toys in Europe in the 19th century was largely coupled with bourgeois Christmas celebrations. The scientific view of toys was likewise coloured by this fact: toys were seen as a pastime and as connoisseur objects.

For research on cultural history, and for collectors, the toy became an instructive object bearing witness to cultural varieties, different stages of civilization, the history of crafts, and the need for social and aesthetic representation throughout history. As far as type selection and design were concerned, it was maintained that these remained unchanged through the centuries (Grober 1928, Groos 1899, Boehn 1929). This view is historical. In his global overview Peepshow into Paradise in 1953, Lesley Gordon divided his exposition into a section on chronology and a section on types and regions. This evolutionary view of toys also contains an inventory of the function of the toy at celebrations and as cult objects, such as painted eggs and dolls. Most studies on and exhibitions of specific types of toys reiterate this historical-geographic approach. The toys of Greek antiquity as well as exotic and prehistoric toys have been described typologically, even though an often stated difficulty is the distinction between toys used simply for playing, and toys with a double function: ritual-religious, and as components in children's play (so the doll). As late as The Encyclopedia of Toys (London 1978), Constance Eileen King divided the material as follows: 1) Miniature Living, 2) Toys purely for pleasure, 3) Wheeled toys & children's transport. 4) Metal toys, 5) Board and table games, 6) Educational toys and pastimes.

Towards the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th, research on children's play was based on Kant's definition of the spirit of play as partly a free, individually chosen activity, partly an end in itself, which had its roots in a biological play instinct characterized by such factors as superfluous energy, imitation, repetition, and supplementary activity. Parallels were drawn between art and the creative urge of the child (Paul Hildebrandt, Das Spielzeug im Leben des Kindes, 1904/1979).

Ethnographic research has focused particularly on tradition and imitation. Early anthropological monographs on the cultures of various tribes mention toys briefly in connection with games and sports, songs and dances. The general consensus was that toys imitated the objects used in everyday life, or that the small figures could be connected with magic. Examples of this kind may be found

in the classical studies of the Siberian Tjuktji and Korjaks, led by Franz Boas (Bogoras, Jochelson, 1904-09, 1908. The Jesup North Pacific Expedition). Functionalist studies in social anthropology have also dealt with playing, and the tools used therein, as a means of forming and adopting the individual to social life (Granqvist 1947, Klepzig 1972, Itkonen 1941: Arabs in Palestine, African children, Sami people). Moreover, ethnological studies have described the manufacture of toys as crafts and home industry, in a wider perspective of ecology and economy, art history and cultural history.

After the 1920s, the influence of historical-geographical and functionalist views and structuralist and paedagogic-psychological theories has slowly brought about a problemization of the concept "toy." The overall tendency has been to fit the "inconspicuous" toy into a wider context, as an illustration of cultural attitudes in general, and as a: meaning-carrying tool in the entity of the play situation. Classical studies of children's play, written by Yrjö Hirn (1916) and Johann Huizinga (1938), are forerunners of psychological research on toys.

As early as 1957, the ethnologist Reinhard Peesch, in Das Berliner Kinderspiel der Gegenwart, directed attention to the great variations of form in children's play, and to the restructuring of play as a continuous process. In his 1959 study of children's play and its changes on New Zealand, Brian Sutton-Smith expressed similar thoughts. The structure of the play repertoire showed the children as being both conservative and innovative, and their need for patterns was supplemented by a flexibility which was based on their actual experiences. The Danish psychologist Jens Sigsgaard has in his definition of the toy (1982) introduced the concept "imagination," the capability of transferring observations from the "level of reality" to conceptions of a more "unreal" character, a creative quality specific to children. By this approach the symbol-carrying function of toys acquires central importance. With the aid of play, and the tools of play, reality may be both negated, deepened, and accorded continuous changeability (Lili E. Peller). In paedagogics, Hans Scheuerl says that earlier game theories treated play as a definite course of events, an "internal-subjective" process. But in play, "external-subjective" objects, rules, and partners are equally needed, and thus play must also be seen as symbolic interaction. This leads us to the theories (Erikson, Wygotzki) in which the structure of play is seen as a particular type of abstraction. In anthropological research on play, the relations between reality and imagination, the qualities attributed to objects, and their symbolic variations in meaning also acquire focal interest (Buytendijk 1973).

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When reality is made to vary in the course of play, there arises a peculiar relation between the meaning and the significance of the toy. The object will maintain its factual significance (in an operational sense), but a new act provides it with new meaning, or "additional meaning." This relation is borne out by a child "playing around" an object (Alexander Leontjew, Jean Piaget). What fascinates me personally is the repertoire of meanings of objects and the cultural arrangements that the children express in their symbolical treatment of the objects during play, and I will give you an example. Here we must expand the concept "toy," and I would prefer to talk about "play tools."

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An approach having close affinities to a more cognitive anthropological view of the objects in the child's world will prove fruitful in the interpretation of illustrations dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries. It will also gainsay the common misconception that children did not possess toys in the olden days, especially not the children of common people. The well-known picture by the older Pieter Brueghel of children playing in a small Dutch village in 1560 shows that the components of the playing consist of the children's own bodies and the entire surroundings: fences and beams, sand heaps and bricks, barrels, trestles, sticks and stones, trees and animals. Of what is conventionally regarded as toys there are only a cock-horse, whirligigs, balls, stilts and barrel hoops, a few dolls and a doll's cradle. Similarly, in Jacques Stella's illustrated publication Les jeux et plaisirs de l'enfance (1657), most of the play tools are things deriving their meaning from the process of playing: there are masks to frighten others with, an earthenware jug for breaking hung on a tree branch, a fire to be jumped over, the body of another child to ride upon.

Oral tradition reflecting Finnish urban and rural popular culture towards the end of the 19th and in the early 20th century also bears out the fact that practically all objects in the physical surroundings could be used to play with. Tools, household utensils, and above all the domestic animals functioned as projections for the children's view of the world.

A game known in various parts of the Nordic countries as "Jacob's ladder," "the Sheep's Heaven," or "the Celestial Ladder," was played for instance by shepherd boys in Satakunta in Western Finland. This game illustrates the principle of the staircase or ladder in culture, the connection between things heavenly and things of the earth. This shows that the objects produced by the children them

selves are not exclusively imitations of the tools of the adults. There is a collection of bricks dating back to the 15th century, from the Tavastehus (Fi. Hameenlinna) castle, which bear the imprints of children's and animals' feet--they have probably run across the bricks while they were drying, or else jumped on them. The footprints show that the children were of different ages. It may have been a forbidden game, but nevertheless it shows an activity linked to the work of the adults, and the children have played in a group, together with the animals.

Quite recently a girl of twelve (my daughter) informed me that "on a beach," she had found a beautiful boat of polystyrene with a sail made out of a plastic bag. "You could photograph that for your collection" was her judgement, and we went to find the place. This is in the very heart of Helsinki, a stone desert where one does not expect to encounter children at play. "The beach" turned out to be a small strip of sand under a narrow quay of planks. Under this plank structure, which an adult person could not enter, the boat lay. It was a somewhat formless rectangular piece of expanded polystyrene with a piece of wood tucked in as keel, half a plastic bottle as boathouse, and a sea bird plume as a bowsprit. The mast lay beside the boat, with a plastic bag over it as a sail. At the end of the jetty there were traces of a "harbour," two pieces of planks laid across stones. The playing children would probably come back and possibly even produce other things, as the edge of the water was laden with all kinds of "refuse" that had not yet been cleaned away by the harbour authorities.

Consequently children's play is still alive, in a form unorganized by adults, in hidden places, with objects that derive their meaning from the play situation--not with the one-dimensional aspect given to it in advance by adults. It is obvious that the play tools will reflect the physical environment. But in all its occasional character, imitation is a creative process directed by those playing, and the properties for play have a role integrated in the playing itself.

Topical studies on children's play behaviour in urban environments in the Nordic countries have criticized the extremely limited aspects of the children's environments. Studies of children's behaviour in modern housing areas in Helsinki, for instance, have shown that the play areas do not attract children as long as there are other alternatives such as pedestrian streets, market squares, and unbuilt areas. However, play with stones and trees in the natural environment as well as ball games and role play are disappearing. Do children lack inspiration from the world of the adults? Are children so strictly programmed for adult-directed games in planned play areas that their own initiative and creative urge are drying up? Will certain games

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simply disappear, without being superseded by others? Will children's relations to objects in play be changed due to a formally perfect selection, though restricted in types, of industrially produced toys?

Previous analyses of toys have viewed the objects as paedagogic and instrumental in the learning process, the objects influencing the children. But objects have also been studied in a ritual-emotional-magical perspective, as objects of knowledge for children. Both aspects bear witness to children's position in the community.

Anthropological study of toys could focus on the unlimited repertoire of meaning of objects in play, and the unlimited forms of adult life in the play world of the children. As a process of reflection and consideration, the transformations of the objects will then reveal the central structure of the world of physical objects in play. Children's culture, the true domain of the children, offers us samples of another world, other "narrating" and "figurative" (Umberto Eco) traditions than our conventional ones. It is difficult to document the actual semantic relations within children's culture, as this culture is elusive in the extreme. The principle of transformation, which is the characteristic form of abstraction in children's culture, works at the flash of an eyelid, and the attraction of play seems at least partly to reside in the fact that it is beyond the reach of adults.

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An extremely topical question comes to my mind concerning children's play and play tools in today's world—a world where overconsumption and hunger, refugee camps, children in war, child prostitution, child labour, and where a harsh, urban, and technocratic environment are realities. This question is: On whose conditions do children really play?

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