

The children and their toys: some perspectives

As crianças e seus brinquedos: algumas perspectivas

Les enfants et leurs jouets: quelques perspectives

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Abstract: Is a toy a historical-cultural object? Could a child learn about their own culture through a toy? Does a toy foster specific forms of communication? Does the toy require a form of social learning? Essentially, these questions form the central thread of this essay, which aims to analyze the toy through the perspective of L. S. Vigotski, G. Agamben, J. Best, B. Sutton-Smith, and G. Brougère, drawing upon their respective theoretical frameworks. In short, the aim is to foster a debate among these intellectuals regarding the relationship between toys, play, and culture, in order to promote dialogue and, consequently, a more in-depth reflection on the concept in question. In this way, ensuring that epistemic and practical constructs are not overlooked, so as not to give rise to simplistic and decontextualized preconceptions.

Keywords: Toy; Play Culture; Childhood.

Resumo: O brinquedo seria um objeto histórico-cultural? Será que, pelo brinquedo, uma criança aprenderia a própria cultura? O brinquedo engendraria formas particulares de comunicação? O brinquedo demandaria um tipo de aprendizagem social? Basicamente, tais indagações compõem o fio condutor desse ensaio, que tem como objetivo analisar o brinquedo sob a égide das perspectivas de L. S. Vigotski, G. Agamben, J. Best, B. Sutton-Smith e G. Brougère, trazendo à baila os seus respectivos ideários. Em suma, visa-se promover um debate entre estes intelectuais concernentes à relação brinquedo, brincar e cultura, de maneira a fomentar um diálogo e, por conseguinte, uma reflexão mais aprofundada acerca do conceito em questão. Desse modo, garantindo que não haja uma desconsideração quanto às construções epistêmicas e práticas, para não oportunizar preconceções simplistas e descontextualizadas.

Palavras-chave: Brinquedo; Cultura Lúdica; Infância.

Résumé: Le jouet serait-il un objet historique-culturel ? Une enfant apprendrait-elle sa propre culture à travers le jouet ? Le jouet engendrerait-il des formes particulières de communication ? Le jouet exigerait-il une forme d'apprentissage social ? Fondamentalement, ces questions constituent le fil conducteur de cet essai, qui a pour objectif d'analyser le jouet à la lumière des perspectives de L. S. Vigotski, G. Agamben, J. Best, B. Sutton-Smith et G. Brougère, en mettant en avant leurs idéologies respectives. En somme, il s'agit de susciter un débat entre ces intellectuels sur la relation entre le jouet, le jeu et la culture, afin de favoriser un dialogue et, par conséquent, une réflexion plus approfondie sur le concept en question. De cette manière, on s'assure de ne pas négliger les constructions épistémiques et pratiques, afin de ne pas donner lieu à des préjugés simplistes et hors contexte.

Mots-clés: Jouet; Culture ludique; Enfance.

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Let the play begin

*The toy is what belonged – once, no longer – to the realm
of the sacred or of the practical-economic.*
Giorgio Agamben

Scientific interest in toys dates back more than 100 years. For this reason, the toy has become a subject of research in various fields of knowledge, such as Philosophy, History, Sociology, Anthropology, Pedagogy, and Psychology, for example. In short, studies in these fields point to a plurality of meanings associated with the concept of the toy, but one that, in particular, fosters a certain dichotomy in how the toy is presented.

Although the toy is also conceived as a cultural artifact for collectors (separate from the act of playing), it is, primarily, an object that provides the player with a kind of support or potential for action. That is to say, it allows the player to expand their actions within their sociocultural context. In other words, it broadens the scope of play, since, rather than merely representing, the toy submits to the diverse meanings of the action.

On the other hand, we have language and its polysemic and multifaceted nature, with its respective codes of operation. In this sense, certain distinct meanings can be attributed to the toy in more specific moments, but in other contexts, broader connotations may be assigned, which can lead to some misunderstandings.

This text does not aim to analyze this plurality of conceptions as a problem. Rather, the objective is to foster dialogue among various authors, namely Sutton-Smith, Best, Vigotski, Agamben, and Brougère. That said, I advocate for the necessity of a more in-depth reflection on the concept of the toy, so that such dialogues may be feasible across diverse spheres among authors and intellectuals in the field. In this way, we ensure that epistemic and practical constructs are not overlooked, thereby preventing the emergence of simplistic and context-free preconceptions.

That said, the scope of this essay is to discuss, in a concise yet non-superficial manner, the perspectives of L. S. Vigotski, B. Sutton-Smith, J. Best, G. Agamben, and G. Brougère, bringing to light these intellectuals' ideas regarding the relationship between toys, play, and culture, in order to foster a dialogue. Furthermore, I will conclude this text with some considerations, interrelating these aforementioned perspectives in terms of dialogues and points of convergence.

Perspectives in dialogue

Seeing toys as an undifferentiated part of the culture (the environment), or as the expression of some underlying physical dimensions (color, shape), makes the first approach too general and the second too abstract. Toys as real and particular cultural things influencing the moments of everyday life are omitted.
Brian Sutton-Smith

By way of inquiry, how might the intellectuals B. Sutton-Smith, L. S. Vigotski, G. Agamben, J. Best and G. Brougère help us in considering the toy? *A priori*, we could refer to Agamben's text, "In Playland: Reflections on History and Play", and, in doing so, historically examine a body of work by the author in question, creating an inventory. Or, alternatively, draw on the works of Vigotski or Sutton-Smith to discuss the sociocultural relationships between action (play) and object (toy).

However, such approaches would lead us to lose sight of the essence of the object in question. Thus, rather than reflecting historically, sociologically, or philosophically on games, play, and/or toys, the authors mentioned provide valuable insights and concepts for analyzing the interconnection between toys, culture, and childhood. Let us examine these insights and concepts (or epistemic contributions).

Based on the various studies by G. Brougère – influenced by R. Jaulin's ethnotechnology in the 1970s and 1980s –, as well as Sutton-Smith (1986), the toy is no longer viewed merely as a historical and cultural artifact, particularly in academic research. In this context, it becomes an object to be investigated from various angles, namely: play culture; industry and advertising; child development; play spaces (playrooms); educational resources in schools; gender issues; and digital technologies (electronic and digital toys).

For this reason, the authors under discussion point out that a toy can be defined in two ways: as an object associated with play; or as a form of social representation. To elaborate further, in the first case, a toy can serve as a prop in a game (a scrap item, a manufactured object, an abandoned utensil, an artifact created by the child playing etc.) and, as such, has a temporary value (it is used only during play). For example, a large cardboard box (used to transport furniture) serves as a prop for a game, being used as a "bus" by the children.

Viewed from this perspective, Agamben (1993, p. 72) emphasizes that: "Like bricolage, the toy, too, uses 'crumbs' and 'scraps' belonging to other structural wholes (or, at any rate modified structural wholes); and the toy, too, thereby transforms old signifieds into signifiers,

and vice versa”. Agamben also explains that playing with these toys does not simply mean handling fragments or pieces, but rather fragmentarities. In other words, the child who plays is acting in/through the toy as a mode of engagement with the world, rather than in the sense of representation.

In turn, Sutton-Smith (1986) and Vigotski (2021) explains that a child’s interaction with an object – playing with a toy in this case – indicates that the situation is guided by the meaning attributed to the play and not determined by the objects present. By way of illustration, we need only analyze a child motivated (by desires and affections) to play at being a bus driver, when they seek out and use a cardboard box or something equivalent to represent their bus (present object: toy).

In this regard, it is observed that, like Agamben, Best (1998) e Vigotski (2021) interprets the example of play as something defined not by the physical object – namely, the cardboard box – but by the child’s desire and emotional engagement to act as a bus driver (action). In this vein, the author under discussion primarily elucidates that in play there is a materialization that diverges from the child’s dialectical correspondence with their sociocultural environment, with their desires and affections, and in their interaction with other subjects. Or, in the words of Agamben (1993), actions with a toy allow the child to act in the world rather than through symbolic forms of representation. In short, it is a concrete action at the heart of the child’s daily life, a need to belong to the activities of adults. However, the frustration stemming from the dynamics of concrete reality (e.g., not being able to drive a car or work like adults) leads the child to turn to toys and play.

In line with the assumptions of Vigotski and Best, Agamben (1993) explains that playing with a toy is *Aion* (*Αἰών*)², in the sense of “vital force” (however, I suggest that the toy is also *Kairos* – *καίρως*). Thus, as a medium for action, the toy embodies the quality of duration, of a different time that shapes the temporalizing essence of experience. Now, action in/through the toy does not symbolize a disruption of daily life or an escape into the unreal, but rather a kind of intersection, a form of diachrony within synchrony.

In this vein, Sutton-Smith (1986) and Vigotski (2021) argue that play (whether or not it involves a toy as a prop) is not a world of fantasy and conventions. In other words, it involves

² *Aion* is a Hellenistic deity associated with time, with the intensity of human life, with destiny, with duration, and with a temporality that is neither quantifiable nor sequential, but rather intensive. From this perspective, *Aion* is a time permeated by other relationships of intensity and duration. It is a kind of vital force through which time is experienced. In turn, *Kairos*, unlike *Chronos* (chronological and quantitative time), refers to qualitative time, an indeterminate moment where something significant happens. A kind of “supreme instant”.

a set of actions within a sociocultural contexto – that is, in a world of reality, free from conventions, yet re-signified.

For this reason, the use of a toy/object indicates a semiotic function of thought, since it allows the child to manipulate the absent real object, making the toy its representative and/or support for play (action). In short, the toy, in this context, is an object that fulfills the function of substitution or support.

Figure 1: Handmade toy



Source: author.

However, Brougère (2013) explains that the toy, in and of itself, can be a cultural product (whether industrially manufactured or handcrafted), with specific functions and a distinct place within the social system, as it is designed for children (the toy industry). For Brougère (2013, p. 67), the toy can be conceived as “[...] a ‘medium’ that conveys to the child certain symbolic contents, images, and representations produced by the society that surrounds them”³.

³ **Original excerpt:** “[...] uma ‘mídia’ que transmite à criança certos conteúdos simbólicos, imagens e representações produzidas pela sociedade que a cerca”.

Figure 2: Handmade toy boat



Source: <https://territoriodobrincar.com.br/biblioteca-cat/olhares-brasil/barquinhos/>

Therefore, he concludes that the toy is a product of a society endowed with specific cultural traits and, as such, reveals a particular type of culture or the boundaries of a culture of play. That said, the toy carries a range of representations and images that give it meaning and significance within the context of a specific social system (Brougère, 2013).

Figure 3: Children's Kitchen



Source: <https://www.paisefilhos.ind.br/produto/790347-cozinha-faz-de-conta/>

Therefore, meaning emerges through a material expression, that is, from the fact that the toy is imbued with predetermined characteristics: shapes, sounds, colors, designs, and

electronic interactivity that are present in the toy. These attributes carry with them a whole set of codes, values, and varied representations, produced within the fabric of society.

Furthermore, Brougère (2013) argues that industrialized toys are offered to children with the intention of providing a substitute (compensatory effect) so that they can experience what is denied to them in their sociocultural context. Thus, the author acknowledges that toys can shape children's imagination, imposing a way of playing at the center of a play culture. Best (1998), in his turn, indicates that there is some influence in this regard, but this is not an imperative that renders the child passive in the face of the toy.

Agamben (1993, p. 71), following a similar line of thought, observes that the “[...] toy is a materialization of the historicity contained in objects, extracting it by means of a particular manipulation”. From this perspective, a toy embodies a set of values and meanings from a given society, bringing human temporality into the present and making it tangible. Even when a child is the one playing with the toy, particularly in the act of playing, the object *per se* is not free from the cultural representations attributed to it.

Well, even though children play with a variety of toys, their play can have complex and contradictory meanings that stem not only from the understanding children derive from the toys, but also from their sociocultural contexts.

The nature of the toy alone cannot tell us whether the player will use it largely to mimic nature or largely to parody it or both. [...] The toy itself cannot tell us, but our knowledge of play shows us that play's excitements derive from both following the cultural rules for behavior and defying the cultural rules. (Sutton-Smith, 1986, p. 251).

In this sense, Vigotski (2009, 2021) suggests that children's play is imbued with human creations (cultural objects): meanings attributed by other individuals; diverse forms of activity; rules; hierarchies; language practices etc. Because of this specificity, very young children's interactions with toys are, *a priori*, often mediated by adults or older children. We must not forget that, generally, the ways of interacting with toys are also mediated.

Consequently, the child internalizes this culture as mediated by the meanings of others and, *pari passu*, gradually becomes a cultural being. However, it is essential to make a caveat. The author in question argues that as this child gains autonomy, they are able to create their own toys and ways of playing, based on their interpretation of the world. Here, toys take on the character of representatives or supports for action – a function of substitution.

Regarding the processes of interaction with toys, Sutton-Smith (1986) explains that toys contribute significantly to a child's socialization by providing opportunities to internalize cultural codes. Thus, through this assimilation, children create or acquire modes of communication, both verbal and nonverbal.

In the documentary “Território do Brincar, Série MiniDocs” in the episode “Little Boats – Tatajuba, CE” – available on YouTube (Meirelles; Reeks, 2015), we see the following situation: a group of children gets together to make little boats. It is worth noting that each child makes their own boat using available materials, namely styrofoam (from a cooler and/or a damaged bodyboard) to form the boat's hull (approximately 30 centimeters long), metal for the rudder, and sticks tied to plastic (plastic bags) to serve as sails and masts. In this documentary, the children explain that it is essential to use styrofoam because this material floats better in water. In addition, the rudder (a strip of metal) is essential to prevent the boat from capsizing. They also point out that if the sail tilts to one side, this will cause the boat to list, so it is necessary to put “a little bit of mud” at the base of the boat to balance it (Meirelles; Reeks, 2015).

The example cited above demonstrates that the toy they built is the result of a form of scientific knowledge, as well as of these children's interpretation of the world. Indeed, they learned about boats by acquiring a form of cultural knowledge through their social interaction with adult fishermen. The example mentioned above, then, allows for a convergence between Vigotski (2021), Sutton-Smith (1986) and Brougère (2013), since these authors understand that, given the impossibility of children participating in the daily lives of adults (work situations, for example), they create strategies and tactics to equally act in the world.

In this way, since they were unable to build large boats, they constructed miniature boats (approximately 30 centimeters long) to play with, using precise measurements and designs when cutting the Styrofoam, based on the shape of adult boats. Furthermore, they used Styrofoam as a material that helped the boats float. Finally, they attached a rudder (a metal strip) to the boat, as well as a mast and sail for navigation, demonstrating these children's understanding of the requirements for the boat to navigate and withstand the demands of sailing (floating, moving, and maintaining stability in the water).

It is evident that this process of miniaturization (Agamben, 1993) relates to the function (potential use) intended for the toy, in terms of action (play) and support (social meaning produced by the link between object and image). This is why Brougère (2013) explains that every toy produced assumes a social meaning that alludes to its own function.

We can certainly say that the purpose of a toy is play. But in doing so, we are defining a specific use. Play does not belong to the realm of the non-functional. Behind play, it is very difficult to identify a function that we could describe with precision: play eludes any precise function (Brougère, 2013, p. 13-14)⁴.

Here we have, once again, an interesting exchange between the authors under discussion. They suggest that the toy, as an object or medium in play, is a means for children to experience the culture around them as it truly is, rather than as it ought to be.

Beyond an attempt to discover the function of the toy in a play, the authors shift their focus to the creations that arise from this type of playful interaction. In other words, in play, the child has a potential space to create their own artifacts, manipulating various signs and altering their usual uses. That said, “[...] the toy is, in this way, a source of manipulable representations, of three-dimensional images: this is undoubtedly the toy’s great originality and uniqueness” (Brougère, 2013, p. 14)⁵.

For Agamben (1993) and, similarly, for Sutton-Smith (1986), the toy, because it is imbued with cultural representations, opens up new possibilities in play, energizing actions. Thus, making a toy or using a ready-made toy involves the process of transforming a form of materialized thought into an object.

Vigotski (2021) is, in a sense, linked to the epistemological views of the two authors cited, in that he emphasizes that play reflects the concrete conditions of a child’s life. For this reason, toys, for example, are produced or modified in accordance with changes in general living conditions and as the child enters a broader cultural environment. In this understanding, the concrete experiences of children’s daily lives, in short, reverberate in the construction or reconstruction of their toys.

Another distinctive feature, identified by Brougère (2013), concerns the link between toys and cultural imprinting. Through toys, children gain access to a whole array of representations and images created by society, the media, and new technologies. Following this line of thought, it is through play that the meanings attributed to toys can be manipulated. However, it should be noted that such cultural influence is far from being a form of

⁴ **Original excerpt:** “Com certeza podemos dizer que a função do brinquedo é a brincadeira. Mas, desse modo, definimos um uso preciso. A brincadeira não pertence à ordem do não funcional. Por detrás da brincadeira, é muito difícil descobrir uma função que poderíamos descrever com precisão: a brincadeira escapa a qualquer função precisa”.

⁵ **Original excerpt:** “[...] o brinquedo é, assim, um fornecedor de representações manipuláveis, de imagens com volume: está aí, sem dúvida, a grande originalidade e especificidade do brinquedo”.

conditioning. In other words, it concerns the “[...] a process in which the child retains certain meanings, discarding others to replace them with new ones. Learning is active in the sense that it does not simply accept images, but learns to manipulate them, transform them, and even, in practice, to reject them (Brougère, 2013, p. 50)”⁶.

Similarly, Vigotski (2021) argues that children have the autonomy, in their play, to disregard anything that is not essential to their actions. Consequently, they can introduce new rules (or remove them), blend cultural and environmental conditions—for example, by creating toys using elements found in nature, or even produce toys that combine industrialized materials, objects from the adult world, and/or elements of nature.

This analysis by L. S. Vigotski appears to be similarly supported by Brougère (2013), who argues that play involves a form of playful interaction, characterized by the creation of meaning and action that emanates from the child themselves. In other words, it is the moment when the child appropriates the available content, making it their own, through a specific production, whether original or not (Brougère, 2013)⁷.

In summary, by analyzing the authors discussed in this article, we can analyze that, for them, it is fundamental that toys be examined through their functions, their uses within a culture of play, and their material composition (industrialized, handmade, created, or reinterpreted).

Drawing on the contributions of these authors, we have outlined several categories that may be helpful for research on toys in various contexts (toy libraries, schools, the street, social projects etc.).

- Play culture: The toy is associated with a particular social group, cultural element, or folkloric tradition. Therefore, it is integral to the fabric of a given play culture, as it is intertwined with the actions and meanings that drive its production, use, or reinterpretation.

- Support: this characteristic reflects that the toy provides the child playing with a form of support or the potential to engage in play.

- Transmission within each society: toys are taught, organized, produced, and/or sold from one generation to the next, or from one group to another.

- Rules of preservation: there is a certain permanence, over time, of many handmade, industrialized, or purpose-built toys. Studies exist that present historical documentation and various iconographic sources proving this specificity.

⁶ **Original excerpt:** “[...] uma confrontação da qual a criança conserva determinadas significações, eliminando outras para substituí-las por novas significações. A aprendizagem é ativa no sentido de que não se submete às imagens, mas aprende a manipulá-las, transformá-las, e até mesmo, praticamente, a negá-las.

⁷ Cf. Brougère (2013, p. 73).

- Flexibility in usage: toys can be used in different ways depending on the game, and these ways are not fixed. For this reason, toys are typically organized and produced according to the child's wishes during play, or according to the dynamics of the group that is playing. On the other hand, the toy industry creates and recreates the need to play, crafting an image of the toy's consumer and owner. It determines which toys will be in vogue and which will become obsolete.

- Multifunctionality in formats: some toys retain their original structure, yet over time, they incorporate certain changes and cultural adaptations, in accordance with local social groups or the rules of the toy industry.

- Universality: many similar toys are enjoyed by different people in different countries. Examples include dolls, toy cars, kites, puppets etc.

A closing for new dialogues

In play, children don't symbolize, but rather desire, fulfill wishes, and experience the main categories of the activity.

L. S. Vigotski

Fundamentally, the three authors view the toy as a historical-cultural object, through which the individual learns about their own culture. Another point of convergence among them can be identified in their understanding of the toy as the result of intersubjective relationships. In this sense, toys are structurally cultural, as they are artifacts of the culture in which they are embedded. Thus, they foster particular forms of communication and specific languages that make play possible.

Due to this characteristic, the toy requires social learning, since one learns to manipulate it – that is, to “play at” or “play with” it – through processes of semiotic mediation by a person, a group, or through imitation. Moreover, the toy has multiple meanings and uses. Because of this, even though children have autonomy over their toys, we cannot forget that many industrialized or handmade toys carry with them an identity (collective and individual representation), an organization based on rules (structure), specific actions (internal logic), an order, and norms of conduct – that is, an entire established historical-cultural structure.

The authors discussed in this article provide a basis for understanding that a toy is more than just a tool for play. Rather, it provides a framework for extension, representation, and support for play. In fact, it offers children not only a means to play, but a composite of

meanings, representations, and senses. While toys structure the content of play, they do not restrict children's imagination and actions.

With this in mind, we understand that play takes many forms and, to be experienced, requires certain specific objects – for example, a doll, a paper boat, or a cardboard box to be used as a bus (objects defined by their function). However, such objects (toys) also serve as vehicles for action. Thus, the toy intrinsically links a representational dimension to a functional one. The toy, more than just a medium for play, in fact represents a dimension of human language, because at its core lie possibilities of meaning that make play possible.

In general terms, the discussion presented in this article highlights that toys are viewed as historically and culturally constructed objects that are reinterpreted and that facilitate various processes of semiotic mediation for children. Although the authors under discussion have distinct epistemic foundations, they share certain points of convergence that foster dialogue and further exploration, which contribute to expanding our understanding concerning concepts, uses, and discourses about toys.

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Recebido em: 10 maio 2026

Aprovado em: 10 maio 2026