

Department of English

Readings in Culture/S2/G3/Spring 2020

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Roland Barthes “Toys”

By definition toys are related to playfulness. However, their cultural meanings are very vast and heterogeneous. In his essay on toys, Barthes shows us some of the cultural meanings that toys have. Barthes says that “toys always mean something, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life” (53). Toys do not mean just gaming or having fun; they mean “something” else: socializing and bringing children up to assume the common roles of adult life. By conditioning children to find joy in or adapt to certain activities at a young age, they are likely to continue to conform to these roles as adults.

The child as an adult in miniature

Barthes discusses the way in which toys are made to reflect the adult world, conditioning children to become accustomed to their expected roles and responsibilities as adults.

“The fact that French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all...” (53).

And about the adult attitude to the child, he says:

“[I]n the eyes of the public the child [is] nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size.”

The toys that the child gets are “reduced copies of human objects”, that is, their small size fits in with the idea adults have about the child as a smaller man—“a homunculus,” a fully grown-up in miniature.

Toys are a “microcosm” of human life, according to Barthes; French toys are an illustration of the belief that children are a miniature reflection of adults.

For Barthes, this implies that toys offer too much direction to children; they do not allow them to engage in their own imaginative and creative play:

“He is turned into a little stay-at-home householder who does not even have to invent the mainsprings of adult causality; they are supplied to him ready-made: he has only to help himself, he is never allowed to discover anything from start to finish” (54).

Children are provided with a pre-packaged set of “feelings” and “values” that come with toys; they are not encouraged to communicate what goes on inside their minds, and learn how to make their voices heard through their own discovery.

Toys and Gender

He goes on to talk about gender roles in toys, using the example of the baby doll designed for girls:

“There exist, for instance, dolls which urinate; they have an oesophagus, one gives them a bottle, they wet their nappies... This is meant to prepare the little girl for the causality of house-keeping, to ‘condition’ her to her future role as mother” (53).

Not only does this show that toys relate to adult life, but also it exhibits the obvious **gendering of toys**: inculcating specific gender roles in the minds of kids.

The majority of toys do not allow the little girl to build a car, a ship, a building, a plane, or super heroes, like those advertised to boys, but instead teach girls to enjoy baking, cooking or taking care of dolls at a young age in a way that is simple, decorative, and fun. They also prepare girls for the duties little girls are expected to have as housewives and mothers.

The main colours on toys designed for girls are pink and purple, while the colours for boys are mainly blue. The social significance of these colours is that it creates division between genders.

Interesting Quotes

“French toys are usually based on imitation, they are meant to produce children who are users, not creators.” (p. 54)

"All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world." (p. 53)

A girl's doll is "meant to...'condition' her to her future role as mother." (p.53)

“[T]he child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it.” (53-4)

By providing children with "artificial" materials and toys are we, in turn, providing them with an "artificial" view of the world?