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# **Toys with Historical References as Part of a Material Culture**

## **An Ethnographic Study on Children's Bedrooms**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the dimension of toys as part of a historical culture approaching the relationship that children have with the past and with their own past in the form of toys. An Austrian ethnographic research on children's bedrooms in the age between 8 to 11 years can bring a realistic insight to the realm of toys currently used and keepsakes with historical references. The main aim of this study, which is part of a larger project in history education on the private use of public history, is to understand children's lifeworld as informal learning environment. A case study will proof this.

**Key Words:** Historical culture – bedroom – toys – ethnography

### **“Children's rooms” as places of use and archives for the storage of toys**

As places within Western cultures in which the youngest members of a family are able to claim as their own space, children's rooms have received considerable attention, in recent decades, within cultural studies as well as in historical research. Many different topics and questions have been debated within this context. The work of Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, who studied children's popular culture, undoubtedly merits particular mention. Even though their interests in the subject were much broader and more general than is the case from a history education perspective, their efforts in addressing how one can handle the inventory and social function of children's rooms should be especially appreciated. They define children's bedrooms as “the one official place of some privacy – and a place where there can be at least some expression of individual taste.” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, 113). Especially in the rooms of ten to twelve-year-olds, who are the focal point of this article, the transition from infant to teenager plays a crucial role (Dinka, 2013). The rooms start to obtain their own “complexion”, “where the presence of particular objects, toys, shelves, toy chest, and use of space reveal more the individual interests of the child, even though it may still be the parent who is in

control of the overall arrangement of the room" (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, 124). For instance, Adrienne Salinger emphasises this in her study on teenager's bedrooms, "Our bedrooms tell stories about us. They become the repository for our memories and the expressions of our desires and self-image" (Salinger, 1995, preface). The rooms and the artefacts stored within them become an expression of the children's own past, present and future; a place where their own history is inscribed, actively through mementos of their own rites of passage (tinkered things from kindergarten, first day at school, first communions, etc.), but also passively through unconscious positioning. In addition, popular culture plays an important role. It is exactly this area, in its shape as historical culture, which is the main focus of this article about toys as manifestations of history.

The definition of "children's bedrooms" in this article is based on the current discourse on spaces used by children at home. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this is often not limited to the bedroom and playroom, but potentially expanded throughout the house or, for example, in the living room, where the TV and the digital games are set up (van Leeuwen & Margetts, 2014). In light of the increasingly dense strands of research, it also makes sense to perceive "children's bedrooms" as informal places of learning. History education has hitherto largely dismissed this room, or misused it, when interpreting historical culture by making assertions that have never been empirically verified. It appears that historical education marginalises, if not ignores, the framework conditions and aspects to take into account, such as private socialisation, due to the rigid primary focus on scholastic learning and its institutional organisation.

However, most notably in children's bedrooms, the social and cultural expectations of the parents, with which they want to prepare their children for society, become apparent. If one follows the thesis of Karin Calvert, the educational goals of the parents would be reflected by the material culture, which means by toys (Calvert, 1992, 3ff). The opportunity which parents offer their children in private to deal with the past and history can certainly provide some insights as to which historical culture garners attention in private.

Historical culture can be defined as the "outer side" (Rüsen, 1995) of historical learning while the inner side is known as "historical consciousness". Historical culture "involves both popular and academic culture, material and immaterial articulations, linking places of memory to functions of memory. By highlighting the historical (or better, historicist) dimension of various cultural fields, it could be

possible to look into the historicity of the cultural praxis as a whole“ (Grever & Adriaansen, 2017, 75). In the last decades, History Education, in German speaking countries, was strongly engaged in research on the influence of various manifestations of history – such as exhibitions, movies, popular journals, cartoons, digital games etc. – on society and especially on learners (cf. von Reeken, 2004; Schönemann, 2009; Oswalt & Pandel, 2009; Kühberger, 2017).

Nowadays, history education is based on the idea that the influences of historical culture have a strong impact on perceptions of the past and how we handle history. The use and consumption of manifestations of history would consolidate, expand or restructure certain views of the phenomena involved. This is not seen as a problem but as a factor of everyday life and a motivational junction for formal learning processes, which is why these moments occupy a special place for all students in the Austrian curriculum of history for middle schools - computer games, non-fiction, comics, etc. (Bundesgesetzblatt für die Republik Österreich, 2016, II. part, 18/5/2016, 113)<sup>1</sup>.

In the cases presented here, the focus is on children, their rooms and the manifestations of history that can be found there. The potential possibilities for finding such manifestations in “children’s bedrooms” are manifold. They range from gifted to desired, through to self-acquired manifestations of history, such as those one can recognise in toys (e.g. Viking ships made of plastic or princesses at the borderline between fiction and reality), in books, digital representations (films, computer games, multi-modal internet services, etc.), and pictures or the like. In fact, the range of possible detectable manifestations of history can be classified as being far denser in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than it has ever been in the past. But to what extent are the academic discussions within history education guided by prejudice and the discipline's favourable assumptions about children's toys? Is what one senses in the general public, such as the history boom on television or in museums and their shops, the longings for memory, preserving a memory of certain people or clarifying crimes around anniversaries and days of remembrance, indeed, also appearing in the rooms of children (cf. Hardtwig, 2010; de Groot, 2009)?

The focus of my work, as the Chair of History and Civic Education at the Department of History of the University of Salzburg (Austria), is to pursue these questions very broadly and at different levels. In society, there are different dimensions

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<sup>1</sup> Similar outlines can be also found in different German states and their history curricula.

in which such moments reveal themselves and emerge as examples. You can certainly get information about the commercial trade of toys (children's shops, book stores, etc.). Kindergartens and schools are also habitats in which aspects of the perception and use of historical culture can be worked out through questions on material and digital culture. In reference to this ethnological approach, Alix Green points out: "The public' often engage with and make sense of the past in private and highly personal ways, genealogy being a good example. There is also a rich ethnology of our encounters with history on display in our homes, including those of people who do not tend to visit museums or heritage sites: dressing-up clothes in the Child's bedroom; books, films and souvenirs on living room shelves; photos on mantelpieces and crockery in the kitchen" (Green, 2016, 114). As part of the research on history education, the approach pursued here focuses on child-centred orientation (Ger. "Subjektorientierung"), deploying ethnographic methods to focus interest, for the first time in German speaking countries, on private space as an informal learning place for the private use of public history.

### ***Ethnographic approach***

Ethnography as a methodological approach has already been applied in some cases in the field of educational sciences (cf. Woods, 1986; Gordon, 2002; Breidenstein 2008; Zaborowski, Maier & Breidenstein, 2011; Macknight, 2016). History education research has so far utterly neglected this approach.

Quantitative approaches certainly qualify as the currently dominant paradigm in the educational sciences - with not inconsiderable influence on history education research. These are differentiated quantitative test methods, such as those used by PISA (cf. Trautwein et al., 2017), which can certainly also be designed to deal with cultural history products (Kühberger, Neureiter & Wagner 2018). In addition, in the field of history education, classical qualitative methods from social sciences (interviews, essays, etc.) are also used to examine learning developments and learning conditions (Bertram, 2017; Kühberger, 2013). Historical learning is always understood as a scholastic event; private preconditioning and informal learning are admittedly mentioned, but have not been researched so far. There are only other institutions that come to the fore, such as historical learning in museums. (cf. Erdmann & Hasberg 2015; Köster, Thünemann & Zülsdorf-Kerstig 2014; Popp & Schönemann 2009)

In the context raised here, ethnographic research from a history education perspective would mean finding out which manifestations of history surround children

and teenagers in the form of toys in their rooms and what significance they have. An ethnographic design is therefore seen as favourable, since visiting the children in their private space, which is also understood and experienced by the families themselves as an intimate retreat, can be equated with a culture unfamiliar to the researchers. Even if the researchers enter this space with a certain perspective and with hypothetical considerations, candour must be maintained regarding what one will experience and see there, particularly as there are no investigations on this to date and the unexpected awaiting them. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that it would have been impossible to implement the standards of ethnography. As a researcher, one cannot dwell with the children in their rooms, or even conduct any long-term investigations. Children's rooms are highly private and sensitive spaces by nature, so the possibilities of taking digital pictures, an audio recorded tour through the room guided by the children themselves and an expert interview with the children in their room were more than a researcher could expect in these inner spaces of families. Normally only the owners of the rooms, their friends and members of the families can enter it. To get inside and to get good contact with the children and the families, the researchers worked within their social networks and private contacts.

The insights generated so far have to be read carefully because of the sample with which we worked. Many diversity categories such as migration background or social class are not yet represented fully in it. The sample consists of educated middle class families, but only some of the parents have an academic degree. Nevertheless, one can get a first cautious impression of these "hidden" private spaces and the children's toys. The ethnographic approach is based, in particular, on the survey methods by Siân Lincoln from the study "Youth Culture and Private Space," in which Lincoln conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews in adolescents' rooms and produced photographs to explore the "identity spaces" of teenagers (Lincoln 2012, 51).

The insights provided here are based on field studies conducted by my students and myself in private Austrian households in 2017 and 2018. The still-ongoing surveys seek to reach the widest possible range of different children, with different social and cultural backgrounds, in order to be able to draw as diverse a picture as possible. At present, XY case studies are documented. Because of the questions within the field of history education, children from the final years of primary school and from the first years of secondary schools were selected first and foremost, in order to make statements about the phase of childhood in which they are

in and which they would then start, at approx. age 11 (6th grade), systematic scholastic history learning in secondary school. The following case study seeks to illustrate this.

### ***Insights into a case study***<sup>2</sup>

The boy, who we will name Thomas, is 12 years old and attends a public secondary school (5th grade). He lives in a classic nuclear family with his father, who is self-employed, and his mother, a nurse. His brother is 25 years old and still lives in the same household. Thomas' room is located in a detached house, in a rural area near a small Austrian town with about 20,000 inhabitants. In addition to his room, he also uses the living room to play, especially with digital games.

The researcher is able to see the child's room just before the child's tour. In his research diary, he notes: "The child has yet to finish his homework. The older brother and I meanwhile drink coffee. Visiting the rooms while passing by an untidy and 'natural environment'! However, the boy knows about today's visit."<sup>3</sup> This circumstance is considered positive, since the everyday living environment was not changed for the visit.

In a sketch, the child's approx. 15m<sup>2</sup> room was recorded in the field diary. "To the left of the front door are a closet and a shelf with various storage areas. Right next to it, there is a window and the bed under which two plastic boxes containing toys are kept. Opposite the entrance, a balcony door is installed, which leads out onto the extensive terrace. At the time of the visit, however, it was not passable due to a strategically placed knight's castle. Just to the right of the front door is a wooden structure with a parallel shelf. There you can find school supplies, a collection of books and other children's toys on the shelf."<sup>4</sup>

When looking at the interview about the toys, which take centre stage for Thomas, it can be seen that he currently has little interest in the manifestations of history. In the introductory questions, which enquire about his current game preferences, some items are highlighted (Nerf guns, Lego Star Wars, and Playmobil), but he also admitted that he would play with everything in his room. However, the knight's castle, which immediately catches the eye upon entering the room, is

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<sup>2</sup> The collection of data on the boys (boy 5) was carried out by Raphael Rettenbacher on 20/12/2017 and the audio files were transcribed on 20/12/2017.

<sup>3</sup> Quote from the field diary on boy 5 (20/12/2017).

<sup>4</sup> Description by Raphael Rettenbacher.

not mentioned. Generally, it can be observed that Thomas only describes manifestations of history if he is explicitly requested to do so in the interview. Evidently, this is its very own level, which he does not place emphasis on for the visitor.

**Interviewer:** So, can you give me a tour of your room? What's special about it? [Pause] Just a quick tour, what you see and what you have.

**Child:** Uhm, so [I have] a lot of toys, and yes, Nerfs, Lego, I [also] have a lot of Playmobil inside here. [Pause]

**Interviewer:** Mhm. What is the toy you play the most with right now?

**Child:** Ah, Lego.

**Interviewer:** Lego?

**Child:** Mhm. [Pause] Yes, that's what is lying around here.

**Interviewer:** Ok. Uhm, what else do you have? You have some books, do you still use them actively or [interrupted]?

**Child:** So, ah, I like to read Greg's diary, and otherwise there's only old stuff left [on the shelves].

**Interviewer:** Aha.

**Child:** Otherwise, I still have Harry Potter books and [pause] yes. [Pause]

**Interviewer:** You said that you are currently playing with Lego the most – with all the pieces or do you have certain [favourites; annotation]?

**Child:** Yes, Star Wars actually.

**Interviewer:** With the Star Wars Lego [set], ok. And what is the most important thing to you in your room?

**Child:** Uhm, I couldn't really tell you right now. I just play with all these things.

If one tries to use the digital photos taken by the child himself (4 photos) and the researcher (10 photos) as analysis material to identify manifestations of history in the room, one can identify three toys (the plastic knight castle, knight/dragon plastic figures; Playmobil pirate ship with crew<sup>5</sup>) and two books (a construction guide for fortresses in the Digital Game Minecraft (Shanel, 2016) and a novel with references to questions about artefacts from ancient Egypt (Northrop & Kilian, 2016)). In addition, a stuffed animal dragon from IKEA ("Minne Drake") and two children's books (Rowling, 1998; Funke, 2011) have to be mentioned, as they concern the implicit grey area between fantasy and history. Without going into more detail here, it should be noted that history education has thus far focused little or no attention to this area of overlap with children and adolescents. Thus far, in the context of the development of historical thinking in children, attention has been fo-

<sup>5</sup> Playmobil Pirate Ship, Product Number 5238.



cussed mainly on factual representations of the past and ignored hybrid narratives between fictional and historical moments inscribed there. However, this area between history and fantasy produces a multitude of images of a past (Harry Potter and his world [cf. Curthoys 2011] and ghost stories with medieval references) that children acquire, as has been shown in a study on feature films (Kühberger, 2013, 104).

If one pairs these initial field survey results with the expectations from the beginning of the research process, regarding possible objects that could be in children's rooms, then one may be euphoric. The subject areas that can be observed as classical, in the context of the Middle Ages (castle/knight) and the modern age (pirates), are represented. But the case study has some surprises regarding Thomas' interpretation of the objects. Wholly in line with ethnography, an attempt was made to understand the child's room as a foreign place and the children as natives of their own culture. Bronislaw Malinowski would formulate it this way: It is the goal "briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world. We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold life has on him" (Malinowski, 1922, 25).

It is apparent that toys in children's rooms are also characterised by the highly individual playing strategies of children. They are not necessarily used in the same way as the adult's original planning and production contexts intend. Children have their own interpretations in dealing with the items offered. This can easily be discerned by Thomas as he merges various ready-made game worlds with his own - medieval knights are "converted" into Star Wars soldiers. Disruptive and vaguely coherent connections are combined and smoothed in the child's mind - a landing strip. As already mentioned, the boy said nothing about the pirate ship on display and the knight's castle on the ground during his tour of his room, and was therefore asked:

**Interviewer:** Ok, what I would still find interesting - would you like to tell me a bit about the pirate ship up there? Where did you get that and do you still play with it?

**Child:** Yes, so I do not actually play with the [ship] like that anymore, but I once wanted it, because there was a remote control from Playmobil and with that you can drive around on the water - so by boat.

**Interviewer:** [...] Would you like to tell me a bit about the knight's castle? Where did it come from?

**Child:** Uhm, that's from Chrisi [brother, annotation.]. Yes, I just brought it up [from the cellar; annotation], because it's really cool and can be used to play games. Preferably for Lego, though. It's easy to

play with.

**Interviewer:** Mhm. So how do you play with it? Am I to imagine that you also incorporate other figures or just knights? Or...? [Child interrupts the interviewer]

**Child:** No, just Star Wars, the figures there. [Points to the Star Wars figures in the castle; annotation.]

**Interviewer:** Hmm. Are you also interested in that time? Like the Middle Ages? Or is it just for play?

**Child:** Well, more like something to play on. I like that too, I also have the Nerfs below [with the parents; annotation] a few shields and swords, but the [castle] is actually something to play on.

It can thus be stated that the pirate ship and the knight's castle are indeed manifestations of history, but an interest in them is not determined by their original purpose. Both items elude a premature historical-deterministic perspective. Above all, the remote-controlled ship is perceived in its technical dimension and the castle as a play and landing zone for the Lego Star Wars world. One might well think that Thomas has more access to a fantastic futurism, but this future ties back to the past, perhaps even temporally stratified. Other flying objects made of plastic in the room, and especially two pictures which Thomas hung over his bed on the wall, support this thesis. Embedded in a futuristic landscape, they show the leaning tower of Pisa or the pyramids of Giza, over each of which an oversized planet rises. The past and a utopian future, which is also reflected in the Lego Star Wars game world, are brought together.

Thomas represents a type of toy usage that has not really been observed in history education thus far. He admittedly owns toys as manifestations of history, but their usage takes place in a very different context, without the need for the past per se. The castle as a stage or landing strip for Star Wars adventures emphatically demonstrates this. This makes it clear that the significance of toys is not determined by their form and function, but is integrated into particular individual lives. Tim Dant emphasises that “material culture involves taking on cultural practices in relation to material objects which define the use and the values of those objects in everyday life” (Dant, 1999, 39). It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between the objects and the socio-cultural practice of their use. Although toys and related advertising strategies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century depict representations of a (past) world, thus shaping the cognition, value system, language, thinking habits and aesthetics of a particular culture, toys must be read in their resistant manner. There, the creativity, the imagination and the ingenuity of the children must be respected; moments that are not fundamental in the objects themselves, but that are the reality of play in many children's rooms (cf. Kühberger, 2019 ; Maddelena, 2013).

## **Results/Outlook**

It would be disastrous to argue that the presence of the toys in Thomas' room and his headstrong game world mean that he does not perceive the past or history. In the interview, he was asked if he believes that toys can portray the past. He responds by stating that he believes that his knight's castle does not portray the past well, especially not in terms of design. While this might be due to the toy's shape (thin plastic, paint, etc.), which is nowadays considered old and antiquated for children, as it was probably developed in the seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas argues: "[...] [I] believe [...] [, that toys can portray the past well]. So, if you were to really sit back and think that this truly portrays the past, then you can kind of see it." In this statement, one can discern a certain form of historical thought that could be classified as positivist or historicist. In fact, Thomas recognizes the view that, in principle, it would seem possible to make an objective portrayal of the past if there was an effort on the part of the manufacturer (cf. Ammerer & Kühberger, 2013, 79).

The study design chosen here demonstrates that the documentation of manifestations of history in children's rooms is insufficient to understand their underlying cultural structure in the child's world. Although they provide important clues as to which of the past's references the children are confronted with, they say little about the play processes and specific meanings in which they are embedded. The ethnographic exploration of children's rooms, as presented in the present example, requires an interview with the child for a sufficiently differentiated description of the toys, in order to overlook the dimensions of usage and contextualisation not inscribed in the object. This results in three levels, that seem important for such access to toys: (a) material object as manifestation of history for its own sake; (b) context and forms of the child's usages; (c) child's reflections on the material objects as manifestations of history. Only through the confrontation of these levels can assertions be made about the role of toys as manifestations of history in informal historical learning. The case studies documented thus far indicate that children, in their private sphere of play, come into contact with the phenomena described here to varying intensities. However, it is always situated between the two poles, namely between the absence of such toys and the intensive use of toys as manifestations of history in the sense of their original design as created by the toy producers.

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