

**Notes on toys: a possible dialogue between Brougère, Benjamin and Vygotsky<sup>1</sup>**

***Notas sobre o brinquedo: possível diálogo entre Brougère, Benjamin e Vigotski<sup>2</sup>***

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**Abstract:**

This work aims to establish a dialogue between Benjamin, Brougère and Vygotsky with regard to their conceptions of toy. We analyze the texts: “The toy, extreme object” and “The role of toys in the child’s cultural impregnation” (Brougère); “The role of toys in development” and “The development of symbolism in toys” (Vygotsky); and, “The cultural history of toys” and “Toys and games” (Benjamin). These authors share the notion that the toy is a cultural object that allows subjects the possibility of learning about their own culture from their contact with it. We identify the convergences and divergences between these authors, showing a plurality of meanings related to the concept of toy, without disregarding their theoretical constructs.

**Keywords:** toy, Benjamin, Vigotski, Brougère

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**Resumo:**

*O presente trabalho objetiva estabelecer um diálogo entre as concepções de brinquedo expressas por Benjamin, Brougère e Vigotski. Para tanto, analisamos os textos “História cultural do brinquedo” e “Brinquedos e jogos”, de Benjamin; “O brinquedo, objeto extremo” e “O papel do brinquedo na impregnação cultural da criança”, de Brougère; e “O papel do brinquedo no desenvolvimento” e “O desenvolvimento do simbolismo no brinquedo”, de Vigotski. Os autores partilham da concepção de que o brinquedo é um objeto cultural, cujo contato permite ao sujeito aprender a própria cultura. Identificamos as convergências e divergências entre essas obras, evidenciando os significados referentes ao conceito de brinquedo, sem desconsiderar suas construções teóricas.*

**Palavras-chave:** brinquedo, Benjamin, Vigotski, Brougère

## Introduction

Toys are a subject of study in different areas of knowledge, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, education, among others. The works developed in these areas expose a plurality of meanings referring to the concept of toy, which, however, engender a certain dichotomy when presenting it sometimes as a cultural artifact that can be conceived outside the act of playing, sometimes as an object that allows the individual to represent, i.e., to correspond it to something, enabling the reproduction of an aspect of everyday life.

Language itself and its polysemous character, with its own codes of operation, can assign certain and distinct meanings in more specific or general moments, possibly generating certain misunderstandings about the concept of toy.

It should be noted that, in the present work, we do not understand this plurality of conceptions as a problem; on the contrary, we regard it as something common and present in any cultural construction. Moreover, we argue that a deeper reflection on the concept of toy is essential, so that possible dialogues between authors and intellectuals are not compromised by disregarding their theoretical constructions and engendering simplistic and decontextualized

preconceptions. We also argue that these dialogues allow overcoming the toy-object/toy-action dichotomy<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, the present work aims to establish a dialogue between Benjamin, Brougère and Vigotski concerning these intellectuals' conceptions of toy.

The choice of these three authors is due to the need to analyze three different toy paradigms that are commonly debated in various articles and studies on the act of playing, toys, early childhood education and childhood.

For this purpose, we first analyze the concept of toy based on the following texts: "The cultural history of toys" (1928/2002a) and "Toys and games" (1928/2002b) by Walter Benjamin; "The toy, extreme object" (1992/2010a) and "The role toys in the child's cultural impregnation" (1992 / 2010c) by Gilles Brougère; and "The role of toy in development" (1933 / 2002a) and "The development of symbolism in toys" (1933/2002b) by Lev S. Vigotski. This analysis was divided into three sections, one for each author.

Subsequently, we establish a dialogue between these three authors who, despite having diverging conceptions of toy, share the understanding that the toy is a cultural object, which allows subjects to learn about their own culture from their contact with it. Thus, in this article, we critically analyze the conceptions of the authors in question, highlighting the diverging and converging theoretical points, in order to obtain a better understanding of the concept of toy.

## Walter Benjamin's reflections on toys

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was an important German philosopher, literary critic and writer of the first half of the twentieth century. He devoted part of his studies to pedagogical issues, games and toys, and childhood.

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<sup>3</sup> By way of example, one could think of how Lego or the Barbie doll are, according to some authors, considered toys regardless of whether they will be used in a game (object that is exterior to the act of playing – toy-object). On the other hand, there are toys that support or are essential in a game, but are secondary to the action (playing), which is what is prioritized. As an example, we may analyze the child who uses a shoe box to represent a truck. This child is not playing with a shoebox, but rather with a toy truck (toy-action).

In the texts “The cultural history of toys” and “Toys and games”, both originally published in German in 1928 and present in the book “Reflections on children, toys and education” (Benjamin, 1928/2002a, 1928/2002b), the author aims to analyze toys from a historical perspective (historical materialism), sometimes discussing the act of playing and its consequences (creation, imagination, rapture, etc.), sometimes criticizing the process of industrialization of toys, which generates a detachment from children in their production.

Benjamin states that the world of infantile perception is pervaded everywhere by the vestiges of the older generation. Why, basically,

... children are not an isolated community, but rather, they are part of the people and class to which they belong. Likewise, their toys do not bear witness to an autonomous and segregated life, but are a silent dialogue of signs between children and people. (Benjamin, 1928/2002a, p. 94).

From this perspective, the author argues that it is impossible for children to make toys in a fully fantastical context. He bases himself on the assumption, although latent in part of his texts, that toys can only happen within a certain culture. As an example, Benjamin infers that adults are the main providers of toys to children, and even states that

... not but a few of the oldest toys (ball, bow, feather wheel, kite) were somehow imposed on children as objects of worship, which only later, and certainly thanks to the power of child-like imagination, became toys. (Benjamin, 2002b, p. 96)

In addition, Benjamin makes pertinent criticisms to the role of children before toys. For him, as toys are still excessively considered a creation for or of children, the act of playing has been conceived from the perspective of adults, solely as a product of imitation. Indeed, it is disregarded that it is the needs of children that make them assign meanings and senses to toys, through a complex relationship with a culture they appropriate from the act of playing itself (with the toy made and/or given to them by an adult).

Finally, Benjamin’s contributions to the history of toys and their social configurations is commendable. According to this author, it is in the small everyday objects of childhood that the social aspect manifests itself, in dimensions that extend from culture to the (unconscious) individual.

## Toys and culture for Gilles Brougère

From a critical analysis of the texts “The toy, extreme object” (1992/2010a) and “The role of toys in the cultural impregnation of children” (1992/2010c), both found in the book “Toy and culture”, by French pedagogue and sociologist Gilles Brougère, professor at the Université Paris-Nord, we will highlight some aspects of toys suggested by him.

The first concerns the themes and locus of the research on toys in Brougère’s works. According to the author, few studies have focused on the subject, as it is considered unimportant to society.

In addition, he argues that the contribution of psychologists cannot be ruled out. However, for him, the object of study of works in the field of psychology is no longer the toy, but rather the effect of its use on the child; i.e., the toy is pushed into the background, and the real subject of research becomes child development.

On the other hand, Brougère considers it necessary to take into account that toys are social products. In this sense, a study that values toys must analyze the representations and images that give it meaning and senses within a specific social system.

The author establishes some categories for this kind of analysis about toys. The first has to do with their function (potential use) in relation to their representation (social meaning produced by their image). For Brougère, every object produced by man contains these two dimensions; however, in the specific case of toys, they merge, associating social meaning and function. From this perspective, Brougère emphasizes that:

We can surely say that the function of toys is being played with. But by affirming this, we define a precise use. The act of playing does not belong to the order of that which is nonfunctional. Behind the act of playing, it is very difficult to find a function that could be accurately described: it escapes any precise function. (1992/2010a, pp. 13-14)

If, on the one hand, it is difficult to discover the function of toys and of the act of playing, on the other, it may be considered that it is precisely in this act that the representations of toys become clearer. Therefore, the act of playing has the potential to make its own objects by manipulating these objects’ images and modifying their uses. For the author, “toys are thus

suppliers of manipulable representations, of images with volume: this is undoubtedly the great originality and specificity of the toy” (Brougère, 1992/2010a, p. 14).

As toys are imbued with these representations, they stimulate the opening of new possibilities during the act of playing, making its symbolic universe more dynamic. Thus, producing a toy implies transforming a representation into an object.

Although the author places great emphasis on the symbolic sphere of toys, the material issue is also addressed, not in isolation, but by constantly associating it with their function and representation. For him, meaning appears, above all, through material expression, i.e., because the toy has a certain shape. The shapes, drawings, sounds and colors of toys are infused with a whole set of codes and varied representations built within society.

In this way, it is possible to understand, for example, the gendered differences between certain toys, between dolls and toy cars, between pink and blue, between cartoons and the many other constructions that influence the representations and uses of toys by girls and boys, a theme that is discussed in other texts by the author<sup>4</sup>.

Brougère also highlights the role that advertising and television play in the construction of imaginary universes, for example, through cartoons that assign meaning to marketed toys, usually divided by gender labels.

One last aspect addressed by the author and that is directly related to the themes discussed so far has to do with the possibility of cultural impregnation provided by toys, as they grant children access to a whole set of representations and images built by the media and society itself. As already mentioned, it is in the act of playing that the meanings attributed to toys can be manipulated. In this context, Brougère emphasizes that:

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<sup>4</sup> For more details, see: “The industrialized doll, a mirror of society” (Brougère, 1992/2010b).

... this impregnation is far from being conditioning. It is above all a confrontation in which the child retains certain meanings, eliminating others to replace them with new meanings. Learning is active in the sense that it does not conform to images, but rather, learns to manipulate, transform, and even practically deny them. (Brougère, 1992/2010c, p. 48)

Finally, toys, in Brougère's conception, can be analyzed according to their functions, symbolic representations and material aspects. Their construction is related to society, the media and everyday interactions, but especially to the use of the object during the act of playing (construction of play culture).

## The role of toys for Vigotski

Belarussian psychologist Lev S. Vigotski (1866-1934) was one of the leading names in the history of psychology. Influenced by Marxism (dialectical materialism), he conducted important studies on the development of higher mental functions and the role of teaching/instruction, the determination of consciousness by social existence, semiotic mediation and its influence on man's conscious activity, defectology, pedology, among other topics.

Despite not having devoted much time to the theories of games, toys or playing, of his rare works on this theme, we highlight two texts: "The role of toys in development" (1933/2002a), presented in a conference; and "The development of symbolism in toys" (1933/2002b), part of a collection of essays published posthumously. Both texts are found in the book "The social formation of mind", and the first can also be found in Portuguese under the title "*A brincadeira e seu papel no desenvolvimento psíquico da criança*" [The act of playing and its role in the psychic development of children], translated by Zoia Prestes in 2007.

Vygotsky does not separate toys from games or playing, a fact that may be perceived in the texts, which sometimes use these terms as synonyms, sometimes implicitly distinguish them as object/action. Nevertheless, when Vigotski talks about toys, he is fundamentally talking about "role playing" or "pretend play".

In addition to this peculiarity, it should be understood that toys are secondary in Vigotski's studies, i.e., he was concerned with analyzing to what extent children, from their handling of a toy in its context, develop certain higher mental functions (displacement in the

zone of proximal development). In other words, the author was concerned with analyzing the effect on the object, not in a unilateral but dialectical sense, in which the effect on the world (through the toy) is returned, i.e., the world also affects the individual.

In general terms, the action or activity – playing, in this case – is a process of transformation (dialectic) that gives rise to needs and motives, engendering other structurally new activities (different ways of playing) and, above all, promoting the emergence of new mental formations.

From this perspective, Vigotski was also concerned with investigating what makes children play and get involved in an imaginary (playful) sphere during part of their childhood. He aimed to identify the needs of children in order to systematize and understand what motivates their actions (in this case, the reason for playing).

In short, the relationships established with toys allow individuals to act in a certain cognitive sphere, manipulating the meanings of objects and of their own actions. Thus, the act of playing is concatenated into three intrinsic categories: objects (toys), actions (playing) and semiotic mediation (learning from the other or through imitation), allowing imagination to emerge, which, for Vigotski:

... represents a specifically human form of conscious activity, is not present in the consciousness of very young children and is totally absent in animals. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action. (Vigotski, 1933/2002a, p. 122)

Based on this, it can be inferred that in an imaginary situation (pretend play), the child acts in an imaginary world in which the situation is determined by the meaning attributed to the act of playing, and not by the objects present. By way of example: a child who is motivated to pretend play as a pilot looks for a cardboard box or something equivalent to represent a car with (object present, toy). Thus, it may be noted that the act of playing was defined not by the object present (cardboard box), but by the child's need and/or willingness to pretend play as a pilot (action). Moreover, the use of the toy/object for representation indicates a symbolic function of thought, as it allows dealing with the real object's absence, supporting the action (the objects present fulfill the role of substitutes).



Regarding the child-toy relationship, Vigotski (2002, p. 132) states that:

Children do not behave purely symbolically before toys; rather, they wish to and fulfill their desires, allowing the basic categories of reality to pass through their experience. Children, by wishing to, fulfill their desires. By thinking, they act. Internal and external actions are inseparable: imagination, interpretation and will are internal processes driven by external action.

Besides being an imaginary situation, “there is no toy without rules” (Vigotski, 1933/2002a, p. 124). Therefore, the imaginary situation of the relationship with the toy already has certain rules of behavior, although the game may not have formal rules *a priori*.

Thus, it can be inferred that it is the social rules that make the child behave differently: “before the toy, children always behave beyond the behavior expected for their age, beyond their daily behavior; before the toy, it is as if they were bigger than they are in reality” (Vigotski, 1933/2002a, p. 134).

While playing, children can be pilots, teachers, soldiers, knights, etc., roles that they cannot yet assume before society, but which they appropriate through their contact with culture. For this reason, it cannot be disregarded that, through toys, children become involved in culture, in a dialectical relationship that enables them to become what they are not and act/interact in their social space with objects/toys that represent things they have no access to.

Moreover, the rule that emerges from their relationship with toys is not fantastical; it has a historical-cultural basis that can be re-signified in the act of playing. In other words, these rules are learned (appropriated/internalized), reproduced and, mainly, re-signified (transformed according to the children’s needs). For Vigotski (2009, p. 42), “any inventor, even a genius, is always a product of his time and environment.” The rules of toys do not emerge before the material and psychological conditions necessary for their emergence are created.

Another idea that should be emphasized concerns the “embodiment of words” in gestures, using the body as a toy. In pretend play with absence of objects (transition from action with concrete objects to action with meaning), a child can be both driver and car using his/her body, or trot around, imitating a “galloping rider on his/her horse.” From this perspective, the child assumes two distinct roles (rider/horse) with associated meanings and senses, using his/her own body as an instrument in the act of playing. Thus, the meaning of the action becomes the core, and the objects are either relegated to a subordinate position or suppressed.

When describing the child's actions in the world, the concept of semiotic mediation and the role of the other in this relationship cannot be obliterated. The playing child (handling the toy) articulates the three elements of a sign (word, referent and meaning), and, at the same time, deconstructs these elements to then reconstruct them according to his/her imagination (creativity process), thus transgressing the logic of previously established relations. However, this process of deconstruction, reconstruction and transgression is not individual; it involves a broader cultural construction and, equally, the role of the other in this dynamic process of designation of meanings.

Moreover, we infer that for Vygotsky, playing is a way for children to act in the world, enabling their emancipation, self-affirmation (constitution of subjectivity) and development (the act of playing as the "guiding activity" that ensures the child's development).

Therefore, the act of playing is a dialectical process, resulting from the child's perception of the world (consciousness of reality), and the child, in turn, plays due to his/her need of acting in relation to the broader world of adults, and not only to the universe of objects he/she has access to.

## **Possible dialogue between Vigotski, Brougère and Benjamin**

The three authors infer that the toy is a historical-cultural object that allows subjects to learn about their own culture from their contact with it. Another convergence between them can be identified in the understanding of the toy as a result of inter-individual relations; in other words, toys are structurally social, since they are elements of the culture to which they belong.

In this conception, toys result from the social learning of how to handle them (representing, "playing as", "playing with", etc.), through the mediation of a person, a group, or imitation. Moreover, toys have multiple meanings and uses, generating a specific form of communication through which games are triggered.

Another very interesting theoretical contiguity concerns the imaginary situation. The three authors understand, each in their own way, that children make adjustments to their world (social space/context) by playing and handling toys. It can be said that the (symbolic) "imaginary world" is recreated, over and over, depending on the needs and will of its creator; therefore, it

is not static and finished, but dynamic. This dynamism may be explained by Vigotski's dialectic, Brougère's sociocultural perspective, and even Benjamin's historical materialism.

In relation to the differences, unlike the other authors, Vigotski points out that toys allow both an immersion into and a transgression of reality. In other words, the child's handling of the toy is engendered by a twofold aspect: immersion and transgression. This twofold aspect is not immutable; on the contrary, it is dialectical. Immersion and transgression, in addition to being opposites, change according to the child's rules and needs.

Vigotski also argues that the space/time of toys develops in a symbolic way. Although the author does not explicitly defend this idea, we can characterize space/time as a shuttle between reality and imagination, in a dialectical relationship of immersion and transgression.

In relation to this, Brougère proposes that the act of playing allows individuals to create, exchange and entertain a relationship with culture (immersion into reality). Likewise, he states that children create their own play culture, based on this relationship. Although Brougère presents the same concepts as Vigotski, he does not establish a dialogue between reality and its transformation. It is evident that Brougère is more concerned with the internal dynamics of the act of playing and with the uses of toys, demonstrating that, between reality and the spaces of cultural creation par excellence (play culture), there is a "bridge", which is representation (modification of reality).

As for Benjamin, he does not intend to analyze the twofold aspect developed by Vigotski. On the other hand, he assumes that the child's handling of the toy triggers an immersion into the imaginary world. Moreover, he argues that the act of playing means liberation, because it allows children to create their own world. His idea of liberation would be a denial of the real world. By contrast, for Vygotsky, liberation is a form of transgression and/or direct action before the world.

Another facet of the toy (or the act of playing) that seems to generate some disagreements relates to its association with pleasure. While on the one hand, Vigotski argues that a child's handling of a toy does not always result in pleasure – or rather, the toy cannot be characterized as a "pleasurable activity" –, on the other, both Benjamin and Brougère observe the act of playing as something pleasant, cheerful and fun.

A final point of disagreement concerns the conception of toy as object. For Benjamin, children are able to play even when the toy is not physically present; everything can serve as a toy, because even without the object (built within society), something can be used to replace it. In the absence of a toy car, a shoe box is used, for example. On the other hand, Vigotski and Brougère are concerned with the processes of designation of meaning the playing child subjects the objects used to. While Benjamin understands the toy more as an object in itself (material), the other two intellectuals analyze the effect on the object.

However, there is once again a theoretical dissension between Brougère and Vigotski. The former believes that, in the act of playing, a toy may be necessary, but not fundamental, since the child would be motivated by the need to act in relation to the broader world of adults. Therefore, the act of playing has its own internal dynamics, which however presupposes an exchange with the outside world. Vigotski is the only one of the three authors analyzed who was concerned with the child's action in the world and the development resulting from this action, considering that, while changing his/her sociocultural context (nature), the child also changes, developing higher mental functions.

Like Vigotski, Brougère also understands the toy as an instrument, since it allows representation, providing the child not only a means of playing, but also imaginary figures and universes; it builds a structure, without, however, limiting the child's imagination. On the other hand, unlike Vigotski, the author did not analyze the child's action in the world (subject), the development triggered by this action, and the extent to which the child's relationship with the world does not change him/her. Moreover, Brougère's conceptions are elusive as to the absence of the toy and the use of the "body as a toy", points that are more rigorously analyzed by Vigotski and, superficially, by Benjamin.

## Final considerations

The three authors understand the toy as a historical-cultural object that enables children to learn about their own culture and act in the world. They also infer that toys are the result of inter-individual relationships, making them structurally social elements of the culture in which they are inserted.

In contrast to the aforementioned convergences, the point of greatest divergence between the three authors, especially between Vigotski and Brougère, concerns the process of designation of meaning. Vigotski, for example, does not limit himself to toys, but extends his reflections to the process of cultural construction, and the role of the other in the dynamics of designation of meaning (semiotic mediation). As stated earlier, Vygotsky understands that the playing child articulates the three elements of a sign and, *pari passu*, deconstructs these elements to then reconstruct them according to his/her imagination/creativity, thus transgressing the logics of previously established relations.

As for Brougère (and, in a way, Benjamin), he defends the possibilities of the toy within the act of playing, allowing the child to manipulate its images and representations. However, Brougère does not delve further into the particulars of how this process happens. This may be a point of dialogue or complementarity between the authors, and deserves further consideration.

Despite the differences presented, the three authors have great relevance for education and early childhood education, as they analyze the relationships between childhood, culture, toys and learning. We consider that this work contributes to broaden the understanding about the concept of toy from three distinct theoretical references, showing some possibilities of dialogue.

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