Playing dangerously: Transformational moments in children's play within a global television culture

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I am currently in the fieldwork phase of my DPhil thesis examining the popularity and effect of children's television and associated material culture on children aged 1-11 from multi-ethnic backgrounds in Westernized contexts, by original ethnographic research in Vancouver, Canada. Particularly, I am investigating moments of transition, material hybridity and liminality in children's animation as symbiotic with public nervousness about issues of moral danger. I argue that this in turn presents the seed of appeal of these products with the informant children, themselves perceived by society as transitory, hybrid and liminal, as often children of migrants, but especially those with experience of the foster system.

This derives from my MPhil thesis work on children's television and toys from Japan and its relation to transformational pretend play. The fieldwork further connects ideas of moral danger to notions of safety and adult concern for children by examining children's use and understandings of 'traditional' space categories, public, semi-public and private, particularly in the light of theoretical claims by postmodern spatial theorists (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) of the 'blurring' of boundaries by shopping malls, gated developments and particularly the internet (Castells 1989, 2000). In this light, the thesis will make a contribution to the development of an 'anthropology of childhood' particularly dealing with the idea of a distinct child culture, as separate from, but containing elements and inversions of the adult world. The results will help in creating an understanding of the development of complexity in older children's culture by considering the diversities in play from toddler to age 11 and charting the clear contributions of global television cultures to contemporary

children's public and private worlds.

By considering both Alison James' thesis (1979) that children's play is not mimetic of the adult world but instead contains and inverts elements of it, as well as Cullingford (1992) and Erikson's (1963) work on play as a parallel to ritual but constructed without consequence, one would expect that a spatial reading of play in the city to be a reflection of these qualities. Certainly, Sutton-Smith's (1976) argument that modern toys exert a solitarizing influence on children's play points to a construction of childhood in line with Sennet's (1977) reading of the public realm, as well as that of architectural and public space theorists (Such as Jane Jacobs, 1961 and Mike Davis, 1992). Considering particularly spatial arguments for 'safety' such as Marcuse (1997), perhaps the most interesting question regarding the anthropology of a spatial version of children's play would be to ask whether children's play becomes more anthropologically 'dangerous' as it becomes more private.

This construction is semantically different from that of the home as 'private' and 'safe' and the street as 'public' and 'dangerous'. However, particularly through the reading of toys and play, anthropological dangers and taboos (Douglas, 1966) such as themes of pollution, liminality and gender/identity changes are more likely to be more present as the child moves from the public realm of games and sports through the semi-public realm of consumption and group play such as schools, after-care centres, and shopping to the private and super-private realm of the home and child's bedroom, or other private area within the bedroom, such as in one of my informant's cases, the area underneath her (raised) bed.

The challenges to this research primary derive from the notion that the anthropology of children, and moreover children's television and toys are considered somewhat 'anti-intellectual'. This derives from a typical view encountered around the idea of an anthropology of childhood, namely that children's culture is mimetic, insignificant and that all children are, are processes, on their way to adults.

Historically, this sort of notion of children as 'becoming' attributes to Freud and psychology in general, that with predominantly laboratory-based methodologies, ethnography fundamentally challenges. Furthermore, it is key to separate judgement on this type of research from one's own 'adult' notions of what 'culture' is valid and what invalid, in that it is naturally because child culture contains elements of adult culture that we attribute higher significance to our own condition. Thus, it has been important to theoretically separate this research from ideas of homo ludens (Huizinga:1938), adult recreation and game playing and notions of carnival. This is of particular significance when one notes that the great majority of anthropological research on children, both historically and presently is performed as part of a larger ethnographic study, or otherwise with some other aim in mind, using adults as informants. This means that whilst a large quantity of anthropology deals with children, little considers children's culture as a distinct entity.

A further point to be considered is the history of the idea of 'childhood' in general, namely that as a concept it is bound together with modern society. This is in contrast to the medieval period where children had no separate status, but were integrated into daily work and life routines (Aries:1962). The idea of children as reflective of some "originary state of Eden" (Kline 1993:51), connects them to romantic, Rousseaun ideals of the natural – indeed the term 'kinder-garten' (lit. children's garden) derives from this source. Margaret Mead, (1932) was one of the first notable

anthropologists whose work led her to direct research on and with children. Mead was concerned with discovering whether animism was present in play universally, or was the product of a specific cultural environment. The ethnographic results of her work with children began to support a distinction between children's stories, play and peer structures from those of the adult world. Later work such as that of Allison James (1979) begins to support a theory of distinction between adult and children's culture, but similarly an interdependence. This is primarily manifest through an inversion of elements of the adult order, but also by the connection between play and ritual. The key distinction between these two concepts here is that, due to a level of inversion and irreverence, play seems to lack an intrinsic efficacy and "carries a negative weight...treated as unimportant, trivial or unworthy of adult attention" (Mead 1975:160). This is partly why, as part of academic tradition, play is seen as anti-intellectual, but similarly it draws attention to the paradox that children, who are considered to be the 'players' of society, are awarded less freedom than adults in terms of the content of their play.

A second important theoretical area in terms of children's play is the notion of 'pretendership', which relates to the ability to transform an object or situation into a signifier of some other phenomenon, but also particularly in the case of television toys it draws attention to the difficult and nervous relationship between adult and children's society. That this is due to a fundamental, sacred seriousness that is embodied in playing itself where in fact children's behaviour is only likely to be interpreted as mimetic by adults in that adults perceive their own behaviour and culture as valid as children's as invalid. Thus, it is the attribution of significance to mimetic play over fantasy and narrative play that creates a sense of nervousness about television and television toys that are somehow perceived as non-educational or violent - rather than the reality that any toy is educational, depending on what the child needs to learn.

Ultimately the toys a child likes will be those that expand the emotional life of the child. It is more a question of adult society than child society, why some children are restricted access to toys that make them happiest. It is particularly repetitive narrative play, based on television series, that adults so despise as 'un-educational' or violent. Yet, the types of toys that are involved in this type of play, such as action figures, not only allow the child to accommodate the fearfulness of the world around them in a safe environment of their own making, they introduce a new type of playing similar to that previously observed in Huli children in Melanesia. (Goldman:1998) A form of self-narration with multiple voicings or 'hetroglossia' is a key feature of television-based play where one child can index various social roles and explore multi-valent approaches to play under the narrative 'backstory' of a television show. The great public criticism of television and play surrounding it is that it is repetitive and somehow impoverished in content, yet research on hetroglossic play and play in general argue that play is always repetitive in some elements, philosopher's such as Latour and Gadamer argue that the 'to-and-fro' nature of play is a fundamental part of all games, and it is through this method that a child learns to understand the pressures of modernity and how to control their own environment.