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## Book Reviews

### **Deconstructing LEGO: The Medium and Messages of LEGO Play**

*Jonathan Rey Lee*

Switzerland: AG, 2020. Preface, works cited, acknowledgments, contents, list of figures, and footnotes. 377 pp. \$103.06 cloth, \$69.64 paper, \$63.00 kindle. ISBN: 978303053644

Jonathan Rey Lee's *Deconstructing LEGO: The Medium and Messages of LEGO Play* brings a media studies approach to the critical consideration of LEGO's popular plastic bricks and minifigures, which have become near-ubiquitous icons of childhood (and, increasingly, adulthood). The book joins a growing body of scholarship across disciplines that turns a critical eye on the Danish company's claims of universality and innate creativity for its mass-produced playthings. A substantial preface serves as an introduction, in which Lee explains his main analytical project: using a Derridean tool kit of deconstruction "to interrogate the processes of ideological formation implicit in the scriptive design of LEGO play" (p. ix), unpacking how the company's stated philosophies of

imagination and educative play—as well as a self-perpetuating sales logic rooted in the notion of the system—accrue around the toys while bolstering a broader commodification of creativity. Alongside this, he argues that LEGO's construction system has evolved into more than a set of "media toys," acting instead as a "toy medium" (p. vi) of expression that can encompass multiple forms of play and cultural resonances.

Chapter 1 focuses on the notion of *bricolage* to explore how LEGO toys articulate meaning at the granular level of their forms, attachment methods, and assembly into both packaged play sets and consumer-generated constructions. Lee dwells in detail on the semiotics of LEGO components, teasing out the tensions between representational specificity and open-endedness. He notes that creative reuse of components—croissants as a building cornice—can resist their built-in significations and preserve the spirit of invention through building. While the semantic lessons are clear from Lee's formal analyses, the discussion leaves open the question of where the figure of the engineer (the totalizing foil to the tinkering *bricoleur* in Claude Lévi-Strauss's

influential theorizing) might fit in relation to LEGO's durable corporate image.

From here, the book's five core chapters each explore a different modality of play that Lee identifies as key components of LEGO's toy designs and its expansion into a wider range of media forms. Chapter 2 deals with the most obvious such modality, construction play. The ideal of "pure" construction as a key to creativity is a consistent thread through decades of LEGO marketing (and through the longer tradition of block play, steeped in Enlightenment conceptions of childhood and education) and nostalgia for what older adults perceive as "real LEGO," wholesome bricks without the frank commercialism of licensed play sets. But as Lee shows here, this privileging of abstraction is largely a myth—cultivated by corporate marketing and fan communities alike—projected retrospectively onto the company's history, overwriting the bricks' roots in representation, long-standing architectural tropes, and middle-class values of domesticity.

Chapter 3 turns from "housing play" to "playing house" (p. 65), focusing on the relationship between LEGO toys, dramatic play, and gender differentiation in design and marketing. Lee briefly sets LEGO in a historical tradition of dollhouses and toy theaters before presenting a case study of the famously criticized Friends product line. Lee suggests that Friends, beyond its stereotypically feminized design cues, essentializes dramatic storytelling as a feminine quality, a marked "other" to ostensibly gender-neutral (but really boy-coded) construction play. Extending this inquiry to earlier products like LEGO's 1970s *Homemaker* series, or to the narrative dimension of LEGO's more tradition-

ally masculine offerings (castles, pirates, the Wild West), could have added additional complexity to a familiar binary and bolstered Lee's contention that construction and dramatic play are not mutually exclusive or, indeed, easily disentangled from one another.

The next three chapters trade the longer historical framing of preceding chapters for LEGO's more recent forays into wider spheres of entertainment. Chapter 4 explores LEGO's expansion into virtual media through video games and toys with web- or app-based components. In digital LEGO play, Lee argues, a curious reversal appears at work. Though video games present limitless design opportunities, LEGO insists on strict verisimilitude for digital replicas of its physical toys; meanwhile, the company plays up the modularity and pixelated quality of its tangible products as cognates for the underlying logics of the digital world—a savvy bid for relevance as children's attention drifts increasingly toward screens.

Lee continues in familiar media studies territory to consider the company's transmedia engagement of external stories through the hugely popular Star Wars product line (chapter 5) and its attempts at authoring its own narratives in the distinctly transmedial and cross-genre films *The LEGO Movie* and its sequel (chapter 6). In the latter chapter, his intriguing discussion of "attachment play"—and how the company positions its products as objects of emotional attachment and vehicles for social connection—pushes scholarly conversation on LEGO in a generative new direction, but it is also where we feel the absence of ethnographic research most keenly. Lee is attentive to the relative

inaccessibility of children's actual play for many scholars, careful to warn early on that his media-focused methods do not grapple with ethnographic observation or allow for a descriptive theory of children's LEGO experiences. At times, though, the lack of a situated social agent at the heart of the analysis leaves LEGO play itself as the actor under discussion, as if it were an entity independent of its players or corporate creators. Lee is better able to avoid this trouble when discussing the LEGO play of adults (much better-documented than that of children, especially regarding online communities). The short postscripts that follow each chapter, with case studies of artworks or fan productions that complicate LEGO's corporate narratives, offer some of the book's best insights about play in actual practice.

A short final chapter sums up and offers sandbox play as an integrative way of thinking about LEGO as a medium—a play modality that can encompass the diverse others Lee sees operating in LEGO's toys and its wider media entanglements. Thus, his deconstruction of LEGO also becomes a reconstruction, resulting not in “any single ethical critique but . . . ongoing critical interventions into the dynamic spaces of LEGO play” (p. 238) with the interpretive tools offered by poststructuralist, phenomenological, and feminist theory. Although Lee convincingly makes the case that the toy's deep imbrication in popular culture and heavy grip on contemporary childhood make the serious study of LEGO worthwhile, the book nevertheless left me wanting a better sense of the broader cultural stakes at hand. What larger lessons, external to LEGO, might we take from this analysis

of how the company mobilizes designed playthings, charismatic narratives, and the fraught ideology of creativity as commodity? Perhaps the difficulty in breaking *beyond* the “spaces of LEGO play” indicates LEGO's deeper success in naturalizing its tightly controlled, self-contained brand as synonymous with play itself.

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—Colin Fanning, *Bard Graduate Center, New York, NY*

**Prescriptive Play Therapy:  
Tailoring Interventions for  
Specific Childhood Problems**

*Heidi Gerard Kaduson, Donna Cangelosi,  
and Charles E. Schaefer, eds.*

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Anyone familiar with play therapy knows Charles E. Schaefer, the cofounder, along with Kevin O'Connor, of the Association for Play Therapy in 1982. Schaefer's clinical and scholarly contributions to the discipline, and with them, our understanding of its powerful role in helping children, have been unparalleled. And those who have followed and applied the fruits of the burgeoning field in their own clinical work know well the many seminal contributions that coeditors Heidi Kaduson and Donna Cangelosi have brought to the field. So, who better to bring this important volume, *Prescriptive Play Therapy*, to our attention?

In the clinical field, there are the purists who adhere to one favored and empirically supported mode of treatment, such