



MASTER'S THESIS

Constructing the Past Through Play; Historical Representation in Playmobil Toy Sets (1974-2024)

By

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Abstract

Since 1974 Playmobil produced a fair amount of historically themed sets. The three biggest historical themes are the Wild West, pirates and knights. These historical themes often articulate perceptions about history that are subconsciously validated in our society. The perception of history reiterated through these toys can be analysed by using the concept visual historical culture. Historical culture offers a framework through which to deconstruct the current myths, narratives and perceptions about history. Visual culture enabled the identification of signs and semiotic meanings embedded within the visuals in the catalogues. By examining the relationships between these signs, it was possible to uncover underlying historical myths, which could then be contextualised within broader ideas of historical culture. Thereby providing an answer to the Research Question: *How has the visual representation of the Wild West, pirates, and knights in Playmobil catalogues changed since 1974, and to what extent are these changes indicative of changes in broader historical culture?*

The research analysed the three biggest historical themes presented in the annual catalogues published by Playmobil from 1974 to 2024. The visualisation of the Wild West was analysed in reference to changing postcolonial critique and focussed on the visualisation of the Indians and American cavalry. The Wild West shows a significant shift during the mid-1990s from visualising colonial myths, to a more nuanced, albeit stereotypical, presentations of the Indians as a cultural entity. The pirate theme was analysed in relation to changing visualisations of pirates in the cinematic industry. The pirate theme illustrates a shift from a focus on historical myths, influenced by the film *Treasure Island*, towards a more mythical and fantasy shift influenced by the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. The knights theme was analysed in relation to changing narratives in the literary genre. The knight theme shows how the visualisation moved from historical myths to the inclusion of fantasy and mythical elements, influenced by changes in the Fantasy genre.

This study concludes that Playmobil's historical themes are actively shaped by and reflect historical culture of their time. The thesis demonstrates that visualisation of children's toys are not neutral but carries implicit narratives that inform and reproduce historical myths. Understanding these visual narratives through the lens of historical culture provides insight into how perceptions of history are constructed through play.

Keywords: Historical Culture, Visual Culture, Playmobil, Wild West, Pirates, Knights

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1. Introduction

The toy manufacturing company Playmobil has been producing toys sets since their inception in 1974, with 2024 marking their 50th year anniversary. Starting in Germany, Playmobil has built up a beloved brand known throughout the world by children as well as adults, making it an integral part of children's bedrooms. Playmobil sets such as, pirate ships and knights' castles, form an essential part of the bedroom interior. The concept behind Playmobil's design is that all the figures, buildings, accessories and vehicles are designed to mix seamlessly together, and can be used interchangeably. This approach made Playmobil an international well-established German toy brand, with over 3.8 billion figures sold over the past five decades.¹ Over the past fifty years, a vast variety of figures and play themes were created and have since evolved significantly. However, Playmobil figures have always remained instantly recognizable by their iconic facial features.

A particularly influential topic in the creation of new sets and play themes is history. Since 1974 a fair amount of sets manufactured by Playmobil are historically themed, meaning that there is an apparent relation to a historical period or event through design elements or accessories provided in the set.² The three biggest historical themes are; the Wild West, pirates and knights together representing over 84% of all historical sets.³ These historical themes often articulate perceptions about history that are subconsciously validated in our society. As Roland Barthes has argued, "all the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world."⁴ Therefore, the toy sets, including their design and promotional materials created by Playmobil, reflect modern perceptions about historical events. Visual imagery surrounding play themes such as *Novelmore; the realm of heroic knights, wicked villains, and perilous dragon*, inform the audience about current historical and popular perception of the role of knights and their respective behaviour.⁵ These historical events reiterated through Playmobil are nursed through historical culture, and often do not adhere to factual historical knowledge. Rather they reinforce popular perceptions about history created outside of educational facilities. These perceptions can be understood as historical culture. The historical sets produced by Playmobil

¹ Horst Brandstätter Group, „Join the Party: Playmobil Celebrates Its 50th Birthday,” accessed on 20-05-2025.

[Join the Party: Playmobil celebrates its 50th birthday - Horst Brandstätter Group](#)

² Jürgen Erhard, 'Wandel Und Kontinuität von Historischen Themen in Spielzeugen von LEGO Und Playmobil', in *Mit Geschichte Spielen: Zur Materiellen Kultur von Spielzeug Und Spielen Als Darstellung Der Vergangenheit* Ed. Christoph Kühberger, ed. Christoph Kühberger, 2021.

³ Erhard.

⁴ Roland Barthes, 'Toys', in *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991).

⁵ Playmobil, "Novelmore," Accessed on 20-5-2025. [Novelmore](#)

foster and nurture this historical culture. It is therefore important to understand what implicit narratives these sets entail to get a better understanding of the societal perception of history. This thesis aims to understand how historically themed sets produced by Playmobil reflect changes in historical culture over time.

1.1 Research Question

As stated above, the assumption that historical Playmobil sets are influenced by and reiterate historical culture cannot be denied. The visual culture within historical Playmobil sets builds heavily upon common perceptions about history and can potentially uncover significant changes in these perceptions when followed over time. Historical Playmobil sets form a good indicator for understanding these changes in historical culture as the company has structurally manufactured and visualised their historical sets. Since their start in 1974, they have continuously updated and redesigned their historical sets, making them a good case for studying the changing representation of historical themes. This thesis will provide an explanation to the following question: *How has the visual representation of the Wild West, pirates, and knights in Playmobil catalogues changed since 1974, and to what extent are these changes indicative of changes in broader historical culture?*

The Wild West, pirates and knight themes are the subject of the research, since together they represent over 84% of all historical sets produced by Playmobil.⁶ As seen in Figure 1-1, the Wild West, pirates and knights together form the largest historical themes in Playmobil production.⁷ Additionally, these three themes were the first historical themes that were added to the production each year, as seen in Figure 1-2. Since they are part of the early offerings, these themes are also most consistently featured in the yearly catalogues that were published from 1974 onwards. The frequent visualisation of these themes is necessary to understand and analyse changes in broader historical culture. Additionally, the three themes each address a different influential movement or medium that altered perceptions of historical culture, respectively postcolonial criticism, films, and literature. Each theme will be addressed in a

⁶ Erhard, 'Wandel Und Kontinuität von Historischen Themen in Spielzeugen von LEGO Und Playmobil'.

⁷ GrahamB, 'Catalogues and Databases – Playmofanatic', accessed on the 22nd of January, 2025, <https://www.playmofanatic.org/catalogues-and-databases/>.

The data for the graphs is extracted from this database. For some of the Playmobil sets the year of first release is unknown, after establishing that the dates were not retracable the sets were removed from the data this was the case for 50 Playmobil sets. The total amount of sets in the data set is 6713, of which 1128 fall into the historical category.

specific sub-question as the themes are not historically related. Analysing these themes individually will help to understand the specific influence of particular genres.

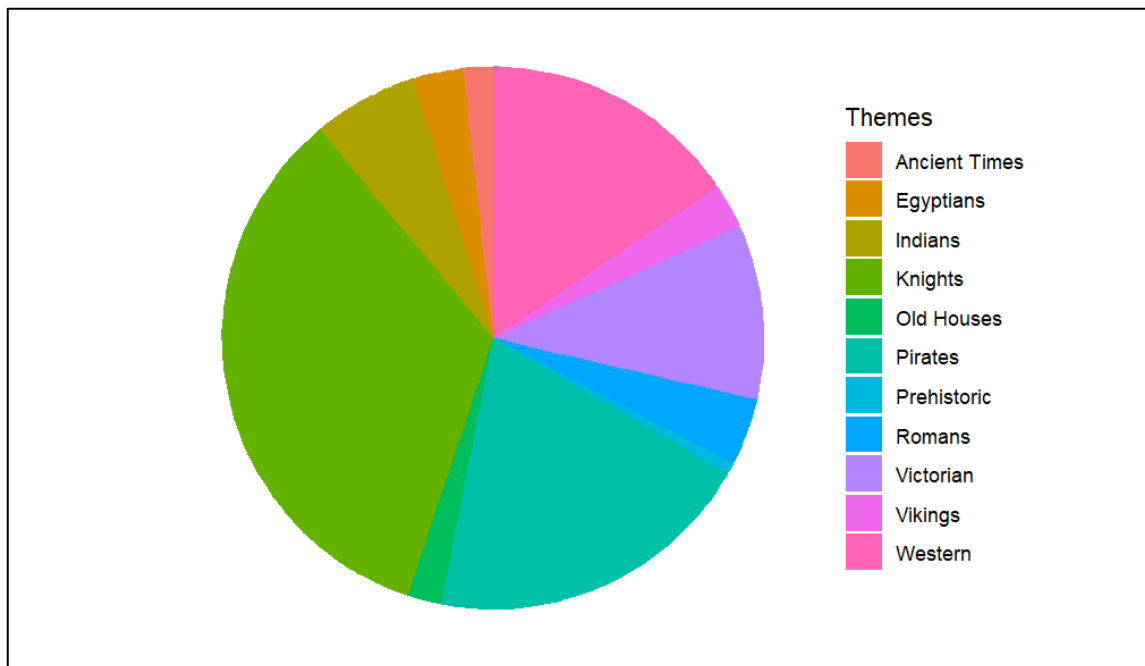


Figure 1-1: Pie chart of distribution of Historical Themes in Playmobil Sets, made using RStudio

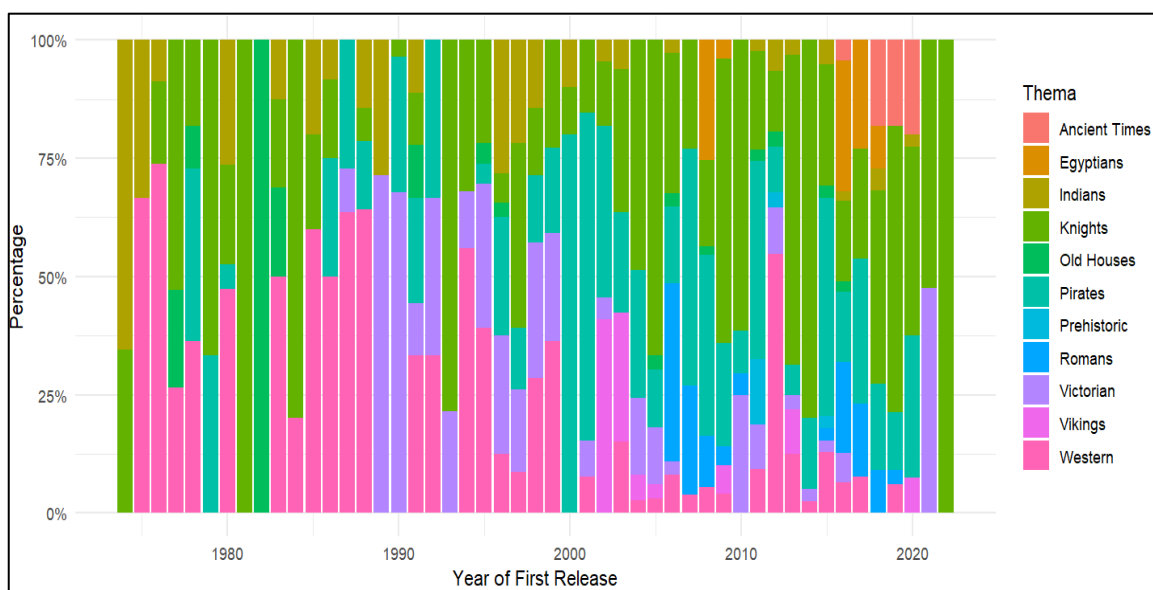


Figure 1-2: Stacked Bar Graph of distribution of Historical Themes in Playmobil Sets, made using RStudio

The first sub-question, will focus on the presentation of the Wild West and provide an answer to the following question: *What shifts in representations of the “Wild West” are visible in Playmobil catalogues since 1974, and what was the impact of postcolonial criticism on these shifts in representation?* The western themed sets contain different figures and accessories influenced by colonial thinking, such as the Indian. Herin two elements need further

explanation: the use of the term “Indian” instead of the preferred terminology “Native American,” and the assumed impact of postcolonial criticism. These two elements can be understood in relation to each other. The Indian is a constructed image of the Native American and is commonly used to represent the indigenous peoples of the North Americas. The term therefore refers to a constructed, colonial, and romanticised image of the Indigenous peoples of North America. The romanticised version used in visualisations by Playmobil is therefore not a direct representation of the Indigenous peoples of North America, but rather an ideological construct created from a colonial perspective.⁸ Acknowledging the term as a construct makes it possible to understand and identify these stereotypical colonial narratives that are embedded within historical culture. This change in terminology, from Indian to Native American, is already an indicator that there is a shift in historical culture, one that can potentially be explained through understanding postcolonial criticism, as well as questions of ownership.

The third chapter will discuss the following sub-question: *How does Playmobil's representation of pirates in their catalogues since 1978 reflect changing cultural understandings of pirates, and what was the role of cinema in this process?* Historical myths about pirates are continuously reinforced and transformed since the time pirates were first active. Therefore, the visualisation of pirates, as well as the historical myths regarding pirates, are the result of centuries of mythicization within historical culture. One particular significant factor that influenced these myths and visualisations in historical culture is the film industry. Pirate films gained popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, experienced a decline and then saw a resurgence in the 2000s. These visuals and ideas might be reiterated in the Playmobil Catalogues.

In the fourth chapter, the last historical theme, knights, will be discussed, providing an answer to the following question: *In what ways have representations of knights in Playmobil catalogues since 1974 mirrored broader changes in historical culture, particularly in relation to trends within fantasy literature?* Similar to the pirate theme, knights are the subject of centuries of myth-making. Particularly within the literary genre are knights a common subject. In these texts, knights are often associated with specific ideals and tropes. These popular tropes that stem from knight focussed literature, such as the Quest and the ‘Damsel in Distress’, are

⁸ Colin G. Calloway, Gerd Gemünden, and Susanne Zantop, *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). 169.

often reiterated in popular culture, making these literary genres, particularly the Romantics and Fantasy genre, influential for the visualisation and characterisation of knights in popular culture.

1.2 Main Theoretical Concepts

Two concepts are central to this thesis: historical culture, and visual culture. Historical culture informs us about societies perceptions of history and visual culture helps to explain and analyse these (sub)conscious perceptions reiterated through the Playmobil catalogues. Both these concepts will be addressed in the consequent section and combined to introduce the concept visual historical culture.

1.2.1 Historical culture

History is not only reconstructed through academic research. History as a profession is only the tip of the iceberg of historical knowledge. Peter Burke elaborates that many people receive their impressions of the past not from academic historians but rather from amateur historians, plays and paintings, encyclopaedias, and museums, or other activities outside of established curricula.⁹ These forms of public and popular history have close ties with societal ideas about a familiar past, and therefore often endorse memories and emotions. Besides, public and popular historical products often reflect common historical beliefs and therefore reiterate historical culture. Toys, as cultural artifacts, provide an interesting lens to examine historical culture. Toys portray both material, visual, and symbolic elements of how history is interpreted and understood by society. Historical culture makes it possible to separate and understand the historical dimensions evident in Playmobil toys.

Historical culture is a research concept that finds its origin in the field of German history didacts, gaining popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period historians became increasingly aware that studying history was not just about historians doing source analysis, but rather a social practice in which historical consciousness is a key component. The main proponent of this notion was Jörn Rüsen, who in a lecture stated that historical learning has an inner and an outer realm. The inner realm refers to historical consciousness, an individual and cognitive process. The outer realm refers to historical culture, a social process that includes

⁹ Peter Burke, 'Lay History: Official and Unofficial Representations, 1800–1914', in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 4: 1800–1945*, eds. Stuart Macintyre, Juan Maiguashca, and Attila Pók (Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199533091.003.0007>.

institutions and organizations that form an infrastructure of historical knowledge outside of established curricula.¹⁰ Rüsen herein understands historical culture as “the complete range of activities of historical consciousness.”¹¹ Historical culture is a term that includes the term ‘historical’ as a reference to past events, including thoughts and ideas, and ‘cultural’ as an understanding of shared attitudes, values and perceptions of a group of people.¹² The concept historical culture can therefore be helpful to understand how historical events are remembered, presented and perceived in the present in cultural and political fields.

Many different interpretations and perspectives of the concept historical culture have since been discussed, but the main debate concentrated on the various layers that subdivided historical culture into different cultural domains.¹³ Rüsen divided historical culture into three domains in which he linked the aesthetic dimension to art, the cognitive dimension to science, and the political dimension to politics.¹⁴ Even though Rüsen emphasizes their ideal typical character, there are some weaknesses to this approach. Understanding and analysing these dimensions individually obstructs the links and connections between the dimensions. This kind of reasoning will result in an understanding of historical culture that remains vague and abstract, existing only at a collective level.¹⁵ This approach implies a focus on how a specific cultural groups or domains represent a particular events, thereby neglecting the communicative processes between people, groups, and institutions that shape the production, performance, and sharing of these memories.¹⁶ Grever and Adriaansen propose a revised theory of historical culture that counters this narrow focus. They critique earlier approaches of historical culture for being too narrowly focused on the representation of history within separate dimensions, thereby overlooking the broader cultural contexts in which these representations were created.¹⁷ Additionally, the authors reject the essentialist views that understands historical consciousness as a universal and collective process. If historical culture is an expression of historical consciousness, as per Rüsen’s approach, historical consciousness is understood as something that exists on its own outside of culture, in a fixed universal cognitive process.¹⁸

¹⁰ Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, ‘Historical Culture’, in *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method Articles* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

¹¹ Jörn Rüsen, ‘Geschichtskultur’, in *Handbuch Der Geschichtsdidaktik* (Seelze-Velber: Kallmeyer’sch Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1997). 38.

¹² Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen. 77.

¹³ Grever and Adriaansen, ‘Historical Culture’.

¹⁴ Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, ‘Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited’.

¹⁵ Grever and Adriaansen, ‘Historical Culture’.

¹⁶ Grever and Adriaansen.

¹⁷ Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, ‘Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited’.

¹⁸ Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen. 84.

As a result of their criticism, Grever and Adriaansen propose an inclusive concept of historical culture, that discerns three mutually connected and interactive levels of analysis: historical narratives and performances of the past, mnemonic infrastructures, and underlying conceptions of history.¹⁹ The first level discerns the actual historical narrative and performances, through which the past gains meaning. Secondly, these historical narratives articulate and rely on mnemonic infrastructures, or in other words social and cultural structures that maintain and constitute narrative and performative articulations of the past. Thirdly, the authors argue that it is important to acknowledge that all historical culture depend upon specific conceptions of history.²⁰ These three levels of analysis propose a more inclusive concept of historical culture, that disregards the essentials and fixed understanding of historical consciousness, but rather puts more weight on mnemonic infrastructures that facilitate these narratives, as well as emphasizing the cultural difference of conceptions of history. In this thesis historical culture will be understood in accordance with the inclusive definition. Hence historical culture will be understood as a concept that encompasses the content of collective memory and historical perception, as well as the different connections to the past that are established through dynamic interaction with different factors.²¹ This broader definition of historical culture, makes it possible to research popular and public historical narratives often overlooked in the professional historical field.²²

1.2.2 Visual Historical Culture

As stated in the previous section historical culture as a theoretical framework helps to separate and study the underlying historical perceptions of a society. In order to understand and reflect on visuals, understanding and combining historical culture with visual culture is crucial. Thereby, adopting a visual historical framework. The design of toys, as well as the visual products accompanying the toys, such as videos and catalogues, all contain visual imagery that can be decoded through visual culture. Visual culture is defined in the *Dictionary of Media and Communication* as “Visual forms and practices within a society, including those of everyday life, popular culture, and high culture together with the processes of production and

¹⁹ Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen. 78.

²⁰ Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen. 78.

²¹ Grever and Adriaansen, ‘Historical Culture’.

²² Herman Paul, ‘Wat Is Presentisme? Over Historische Cultuur in de 21e Eeuw’, *Tijdschrift Voor Geschiedenis* 134, no. 1 (2021): 109–17.

consumption or reception associated with them.”²³ According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, visual culture is an interpretative framework that helps to explain visual depiction and how these relate to society, thereby making it possible to unveil narrative structures. The meaning of the visual relies on its relationship to the exterior reality.²⁴ Visual culture is often connected to forms of critical analysis like visual rhetorics, including both semiotics and rhetorical techniques. Semiotic analysis is the study of signs and how these create structured meanings; rhetorics is the discipline that examines the structure and uses of figurative language, including metaphors, metonymy and so on. In essence, visual culture focusses on the visual processing of signs and their meanings in images, and how to read and interpret visuals in relation to their context.²⁵

The analysis of signs can provide valuable insights into the visual aspects of Playmobil sets, particularly in how visuals and design elements in the sets align with and reflect societal values. This is where “visual historical culture” can be a useful concept. By examining the signs and symbols represented within the Playmobil sets, one can decode the historical narratives embedded into the visuals. In turn these historical narratives can be understood and explained in reference to their current historical culture. Visual culture and historical culture combined enables a visual analysis of Playmobil catalogues in relation to their historical context. This approach draws attention to the impact of specific design choices and accessories and offers an explanation of how and why certain historical elements are depicted and what messages they convey about history.

1.3 Literature Review

Despite the highly valuable visual angle on historical representation in toys, visual approaches to understanding popular historical culture in toys are still explicitly rare. Research has been performed on other aspects regarding toys, such as rhetorics and design elements evident in toys, but the focus on historical culture within toys is yet to be researched. Often, research regarding toys focusses on current societal perceptions and values reiterated in toys. This research approach is mostly focussed on what narratives toys reconstruct about current societal

²³ Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, ‘Visual Culture’, in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-2955>.

²⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, ‘What Is Visual Culture’, in *Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998).

²⁵ Marcel Danesi, ‘Visual Rhetoric and Semiotic’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-43>.

perceptions not about perceptions of history. Historians have looked into the influence of broader historical culture on commercial items, more specifically the consumption of history as a product, but they have yet to research influences of historical culture on toys and how history is reflected through toys.

Jerome de Groot, in his book *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, highlights that over the past few decades, history and historical genres have become a large part of popular culture.²⁶ De Groot notes that history as a leisure product, has undergone a significant transformation and experienced an enormous boom. History is not just an academic discipline owned and produced by scholars. History is becoming a popular product owned and handled by amateur historians and consumers. This shift has turned history into an accessible and marketable product, influencing how individuals engage with and interpret historical narratives. De Groot argues that the consumption of history is an intricate and multifaceted process, one that enables individuals to form personal connections with historical events. Such connections have the potential to encourage a deeper sense of historical consciousness or historical imagination among the audience, which will potentially enable a more emotional and intellectual engagement with the past.²⁷ Through these processes, history ceases to be a static academic entity and instead becomes a dynamic one. One that has the potential to open up a dialogue between the individual and the past. Playmobil takes part in the process of creating a dialogue between factual historical knowledge and leisure historical products. With their historical products they partake in the creation of a collective historical narrative, that can be leisurely enjoyed by children as well as adults. While De Groot's work provides an extensive exploration of historical consumption and its commodification, his analysis largely omits the role of historical representation in children's toys and other commodities specifically aimed at children.

If the academic domain wishes to elaborate on the concept of history as a commodity, particularly in the context of children's toys, it is important to understand toys as cultural artifacts. Cultural artifacts are often part of material culture and can be used as a case study in research to explore social and cultural norms articulated within a society. In *Playing with History: American Identities and Children's Consumer Culture* by Molly Rosner, she tries to exemplify the idea of toys as cultural artifacts. Rosner examines children's toys as part of

²⁶ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640754>. 9.

²⁷ De groot, *Consuming History*, 9.

material culture to understand what these toys reveal about the time and context they were produced in.²⁸ Rosner analyses children's toys from a socio-historical perspective, trying to understand how the historical context influences the creation of certain toys. According to Rosner, the theme and design choices of a certain toy are heavily influenced by the current social context of a society. For example the political ideological messages surrounding the Cold War stories of the western frontier are structurally found in theme parks, as well as children's story books produced at the time.²⁹ The idea of toys as cultural artefacts is reiterated elsewhere by Katie Ellis in her book *Disability and Popular culture*, where she states "Firstly, they [toys] mirror the values of the society that produces them; their shapes, colours and textures reflect what we value as important or socially acceptable at a particular moment in time."³⁰ Ellis also emphasizes the critical role that representation in toys play in shaping children's perceptions of themselves and the world around them. The notion that toys are shaped by cultural perceptions and collective narratives is well-documented in academic literature. Scholars such as Barsch and Mathis argue that interpretations of historical events in toys, like Playmobil, reflect collective patterns of understanding of historical events by society. The authors illustrate how societal values and historical meanings are embedded within material culture.³¹ Toys, as material representations of history, become carriers of these cultural narratives, offering insights into the ways societies view and reconstruct their histories.³² While Barsch and Matis did focus on the representation of history in toys, their study took a social approach that focussed on the historical perception of toys by children.³³

The argument that toys hold historical significance has become a foundational framework in academic research on the material culture of toys. Scholars such as Rosner, Ellis, Barsch and Matis, have explored how toys serve as cultural artifacts, revealing insights into the norms, ideas and values of the societies that produce them. However, much of this research has overlooked the specific role of historical representation within toys, leaving a gap in our understanding of how history is communicated and reimaged through toys. This oversight is

²⁸ Molly Rosner, *Playing with History: American Identities and Children's Consumer Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).

²⁹ Rosner.

³⁰ Ellis Katie, 'Our Moment in Time: The Transitory and Concrete Value of Disability Toys', in *Disability and Popular Culture: Focusing Passion, Creating Community and Expressing Defiance* (Surrey: Routledge, 2015). 15.

³¹ Sebastian Barsch and Christian Mathis, "With these exhibits many interesting things can be learned about past times": Playmobil's History Class – representations, reflections and expectations', *History Education Research Journal* 17, nr. 2 (20 October 2020), <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.17.2.02>. 155.

³² Barsch and Mathis, "With these exhibits many interesting things can be learned about past times." 155.

³³ Barsch and Mathis, "With these exhibits many interesting things can be learned about past times".

unfortunate, as history has consistently been a prominent theme in the design and construction of toys throughout time. However, understanding toys as cultural artifacts offer a unique window to analyse historical ideas of the past within toys in relations to current society.

A scholar who studies historical representation in children's toys on a qualitative level is Jürgen Erhard. In his article "Wandel und Kontinuität von historischen Themen in Spielzeugen von LEGO und Playmobil" he examines the changes in representation of historical themes of toy manufacturing companies Playmobil and Lego.³⁴ The purpose of Erhard's quantitative research is to create a first inventarisation of changes in historical themes as a basis for further research. Erhard examines how accessories in Playmobil and Lego sets have changed over time, and what conclusions can be taken based on these changes in accessories, names of sets and themes. One of Erhard's conclusions is that fantasy elements are increasingly incorporated into historical play themes.³⁵ He suggests that this trend could be driven by commercial motives, particularly in the case of Lego, where historical representations are often tied to officially licensed merchandise from popular fantasy series or films. Furthermore, Erhard notes that the recurring theme of battles between 'good' and 'evil' is frequently emphasized in supplementary materials related to historical sets. He notes the biggest shift of historical representation in sets to be around the year 2000.

The popularity of fantasy elements in historical representations is also reiterated by Chrispoh Kühberger. In his article "Of Dragons and Dinosaurs," Kühberger examines historical representation in children's toys. Kühberger identifies a prevailing trend in popular historical culture that reveals a blurred line between the past and a fictionalized past.³⁶ He argues that this blending of historical and fantasy elements reflects a broader cultural narrative that merges imagination with historical narratives, particularly in products targeted towards children.³⁷ Kühberger explains that this phenomenon is often evident in toy sets, and though his article focuses particularly on dragons and dinosaurs. This phenomenon is also evident in Playmobil sets like Noveltmore, which incorporates historical themes like knights alongside fantasy elements like dragons. This interplay between historical and fantasy components exemplifies the commodification of history. The conclusion by Erhard as well as Kühberger are part of larger discussion on representation of popular historical culture. Erhard findings on the

³⁴ Erhard, 'Wandel Und Kontinuität von Historischen Themen in Spielzeugen von LEGO Und Playmobil'.

³⁵ Erhard, "Wandel Und Kontinuität von Historischen Themen in Spielzeugen von LEGO Und Playmobil."

³⁶ Christoph Kühberger, 'Of Dragons and Dinosaurs: How Children's Toys and Games Create Ideas of the Past, of History and of Fiction', *History Education Research Journal* 18, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.18.2.04>.

³⁷ Kühberger, "Of Dragons and Dinosaurs."

continuities and change of historical themes produced by Lego and Playmobil provide a strong basis to build on for more qualitative visual research. Additionally, both their findings on the addition of fantasy elements lay the basis for a more in-depth visual research on the visibility and representation of fantasy elements. The addition of visual analysis, besides the quantitative analysis, will provide a more in depth understanding of how these fantasy elements are incorporated into representation of historical culture.

Besides the quantitative analysis of historical representation in toys, research in toys often lay emphasis on how historical themed Playmobil sets are received by children. Take for example Barsch and Mathis who examined the reception of Playmobil's History Class through an anthropological research perspective.³⁸ This research is focussed on the reception of historical themes by children. While this anthropological perspective is undoubtedly valuable, historians should also contribute by focusing more on how history is actively represented in toys. As explained earlier toys have been researched as cultural material artefacts. Playmobil is a relevant subject for studies into historical-cultural interpretation because their design choices align with the current context.

Another scholar who studies this argument is Jeff Bowersox, in his research on representation and diversity in Playmobil toys. Bowersox explores how Playmobil products navigate tensions surrounding racial and ethnic representation.³⁹ Bowersox reveals that Playmobil's designs are deeply influenced by social and cultural perceptions, often resulting in the exclusion or marginalization of certain groups. He argues that Playmobil toys function as a reflective measure of society, meaning they serve as tools for communicating specific social and cultural perspectives. Furthering this argument, Van Leeuwen states that Playmobil characters and accessories convey particular worldviews and reinforce dominant narratives about society.⁴⁰ This analysis highlights how visual representations within Playmobil are not neutral but rather a reflection of dominant societal ideologies, shaping how history is interpreted and internalized by consumers. Van Leeuwen argues that the semiotic relations of Playmobil can be analysed by their roles, identities, and symbolic meanings. In his article, he addresses what kinds of roles, identities, and meanings Playmobil sets can convey. He emphasizes that these representations, whether intentional or incidental, carry ideological weight and contribute

³⁸ Barsch and Mathis, "With these exhibits many interesting things can be learned about past times".

³⁹ Jeff Bowersox, 'Playing with Diversity: Racial and Ethnic Difference in Playmobil Toys', *Consumption Markets & Culture* 25, no. 2 (4 March 2022): 139–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2022.2046563>.

⁴⁰ Theo Van Leeuwen, 'The World According to Playmobil', *SEMIOTICA* 173, no. 1–4 (February 2009): 299–315, <https://doi.org/10.1515/SEMI.2009.013>.

to the formation of historical and cultural perceptions in younger audiences.⁴¹ Van Leeuwen and Bowersox delve deeper into the design features of Playmobil, analysing how visual elements reiterate cultural values. They integrate the study of semiotics into their approach, examining signs within Playmobil toy sets and what meaning these signs communicate and how they reinforce social narratives.

In summary, the research contributions outlined in this section cover the academic discourse surrounding the commodification of history and social and historical representation in toys. The commodification of history in children's toys represents a complex interplay between historical narratives, cultural values, and commercial interests. Several academics, like de Groot, Erhard, and Kühbergers, have already contributed to an understanding of how history is consumed and represented in society. Their studies have shown that history can be understood as a commercial product, hereby touching upon the influence of historical culture within commercial products. Other scholars, such as Rosner, Ellis, Barsch and Mathis examine toys as cultural artifacts that can reciprocate societal values. Additionally, Van Leeuwen and Bowersox focus on the same arguments regarding toys as cultural artifacts but pay specific attention to the toy manufacturing company Playmobil. These publications constitute a relevant academic discourse on the research of historical representation within toys.

1.4 Innovative Aspects

Current social and cultural ideologies that are articulated through toys have been researched and summarised in 1.3. Prior studies by among others Barthes, Rosner and Katie, have understood toys as representations of society and studied toys to understand societal values. However, as of now academics have yet to research historical perceptions in toys as a means to understand current receptions of history in a society. This thesis will analyse the Playmobil collection from this perspective, in order to get a better understanding of the representation of history in toys. Understanding historical perceptions within toys, can reveal societies understanding of a certain historical phenomena or personas and how these perceptions change. Prior studies, such as those by Bowersox and Van Leeuwen, have already highlighted issues of diversity, representation and semiotic meaning within Playmobil toys. However, there remains a gap in analysing how Playmobil presents their historical sets.

⁴¹ Van Leeuwen.

This thesis builds upon prior research by Erhard. In his research, Erhard created an initial outline of changes in historical themes, as a basis for a more in-depth visual research of the design and accessories of toys. He identified the three most prominent historical themes in Playmobil, the Wild West, Pirates and Knight, and noted an overall increase of fantasy elements within toy sets. These findings are supported by Kühbergers findings. The identification of these themes, as well as the indication of the blurred line between fantasy and history, serves as a starting point for this thesis. Through visual analysis, this thesis aims to create a more nuanced understanding of this indicated blurred line between fantasy and history, as well as other significant changes within representation of history. This thesis will therefore deconstruct historical narratives that are reflected within Playmobil toys and align these with changes in historical culture, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the representation of historical themes the Wild West, knights and pirates.

By addressing the historical themes, this research will contribute to the broader discourse on historical commodification and visual historical culture. Besides expanding on the existing literature regarding the role of toys as cultural artifacts, this thesis aims to offer new insights on how to approach historical culture from a visual perspective. Visual historical culture can prove to be a helpful concept for understanding and deconstructing perceptions of history, as it allows researchers to deconstruct historical visuals and relate these to their exterior reality. The exterior reality can help to understand these narratives and how they are related to the current historical culture. Through the perspective of visual historical culture this thesis aims to uncover new insights regarding the changing perceptions of historical culture in toys.

1.5 Sources

In this thesis the main primary source is a collection of Playmobil catalogues that are published yearly. These sources are annually published by Playmobil and visualise the Playmobil toy sets. This visualisation is necessary to examine the subconscious historical narrative reiterated by Playmobil. Next to that, this thesis will use a qualitative data collection to supplement the visual analysis. This data set enables anchoring and understanding of significant shifts in visualisation. This data set was established by GrahamB, a Playmobil hobbyist, he created an excel database on the distribution of sets produced by Playmobil from 1974 to 2022. This dataset draws from several sources: PlaymoDB, Playmobil.de (official online archive by Playmobil), Klickypedia,

Mundobil, and the book *Collector*.⁴² These sources all provide databases of Playmobil sets and include among other things; corresponding themes of the set, year of first release, set number and market exposures. The data collection integrates these sources and provides a credible source for preparatory research. Additionally the results from this preparatory research are verified with published academic literature. The dataset allows to extract the distribution of the historical Playmobil themes, exemplified in Figure 1-1, 1-2 and 2-2.

Building upon a visual approach the main body of sources will focus on visual aspects regarding the historical representation in Playmobil. As this thesis understands Playmobil to be a commercial institution operating in historical culture, the main selection criteria for sources is that they are produced by the company themselves. The main focus of sources herein will be the catalogues that Playmobil publishes yearly since their inception in 1974. During the mid-1990s Playmobil started to publish these catalogues twice a year. A catalogue consists of a visual overview of current sets. In this overview and visualisation Playmobil reconstructs dominant historical narratives. Unfortunately, there is no single archive that contains all Playmobil catalogues from 1974 to 2024. As a result, the catalogues had to be manually collected based on their availability online. Digitized versions of the catalogues were originally published on the Playmobil website in 2014 but have since been removed. However, thanks to a Playmobil hobbyist forum, it was possible to retrieve and download the URLs where most catalogues remain accessible, despite no longer being directly linked from the official website.

The source files include annual catalogues published by Playmobil from 1974 to 2023. Most years are represented in the files except for the years 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2024. Additionally, the double catalogues published from the mid-1990s onwards are also not included in the file collection. This does not impose an issue, as the missing years were available elsewhere online. The source files does not include play world specific folders or pamphlets that were also produced in later years. This is also not a significant limitation, as the annual catalogues are the most consistent publication related to visual representation of Playmobil sets. Additionally, given the scope of this thesis, the catalogues will not be supplemented with other visual materials produced by Playmobil, such as videos or games. To verify the initial release years of specific sets and their corresponding accessories, the following two reference books are used: *Playmobil Collector 1974-2009* and *Playmobil Collector 2010-2022*. These sources

⁴² GrahamB, 'Catalogues and Databases – Playmofanatic', accessed on the 22nd of January, 2025, <https://www.playmofanatic.org/catalogues-and-databases/>.

contain all the sets that are published each year, and additional information about the market exposure of these sets as well as how long they were available on the market.

1.6 Methodology

The main focus of the methodology in this thesis is visual culture. This visual approach will be based on semiotic methodologies proposed by Roland Barthes. In his book *Image – Music – Text* Barthes states that there are three supposed meanings embedded into imagery: denotation, connotation and myth.⁴³ Within his theory, Barthes discusses the concepts of the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the visual that conveys meaning, while the signified represents the interpretation or understanding of the meaning by the observer. Barthes argues that every visual functions has a sign and, therefore, has a signifier that communicates meaning. This meaning is not fixed it is interpreted in relation to an individual's exterior reality, thereby reflecting specific cultural, social and historical context.

In his theory Barthes explains three different meanings in visuals: denotation, connotation and myth. Denotation is the literal descriptive meaning of the visual. The purely denotative status of visuals is supposed to resemble the 'objective' visual thereby reflecting on descriptive questions such as: what colours are in the set, what design elements are included, how are the figures and attributes positioned?⁴⁴ The connotative meaning is the historical, cultural and social message that an image conveys and how the observer will understand the connotative meaning is based on their historical, cultural or social background.⁴⁵ A question related to the connotative meaning of the visual could be: how are historical values, phenomena, and ideas represented (such as gender, family structures, or violence)? The last term, myth, is related to the connotative meaning of the image. In reflecting certain historical, cultural or social values, myths are often subconsciously reiterated.⁴⁶ The myth therefore reinforces these historical, cultural and social perceptions and translates them into broader cultural narrative. For Barthes, embracing a Marxist perspective, the term myth focussed on uncovering liberalist and consumerist tendencies in society. This is evident in his chapter "Toys" where he talks about toys as highly socialised objects that are constituted through myths in adult life and supposedly reciprocate liberalist tendencies.⁴⁷ In this thesis myths will not be assessed from a

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977).

⁴⁴ Barthes. 18.

⁴⁵ Barthes. 22.

⁴⁶ Barthes. 65.

⁴⁷ Barthes, 'Toys'.

Marxist perspective, but rather the concepts will be utilised to decode the visuals and understand them in relations to their current historical culture.

To identify shifts in historical culture, each theme will be researched individually. The visuals that relate to the particular theme will be analysed annually to identify significant shifts. A visual analysis sheet, is used to aid this process, the format is included in Appendix I. The format is divided up into six categories, the first category includes the metadata such as the year, presence of the theme and 2-3 key sets. The second, third and fourth category: visual analysis, textual analysis and material analysis are based on the denotive meaning of visuals as understood by Barthes. The fifth category is based on the connotative meanings and myths reiterated in the visuals. This section translates the key meanings of the denotative visuals and relates them to the cultural, historical, or social meaning. Finally, the last category focusses on the year-over-year comparison between the visuals, in order to summarize and identify significant shift in the visualisation of history.

During the analysis, visuals will be interpreted using the semiotic framework developed by Roland Barthes, focusing on three key concepts: denotation, connotation, and myth. This approach, adopted into the visual analysis sheets, allows for the decoding of underlying historical cultural narratives embedded in the imagery. By applying this method yearly, it becomes possible to trace trends and observe changes in the representation of historical culture over time. This analysis will contribute to answering the research question by revealing how Playmobil's visual language reflects historical narratives.

This thesis is structured into three chapters that each single out one of Playmobil's historical themes. First the Wild West will be analysed in chapter 2 to understand changes in visual culture related to the Indians and the American Cavalry. The goal of this chapter is to identify certain changes in representations of the Wild West, related to the Indians and the American Cavalry, and how these changes reiterate shifts in broader historical culture. The historical context in this chapter is focussed on postcolonial criticism, and how changes in opposition of Indians and Americans are related to postcolonial critique.

The third chapter will single out the Pirate theme, to understand how this theme relates to changes in historical culture. In this chapter the historical myth will assume a central role in explaining the visualisation of pirates in the early years. The historical context within this chapter will focus on the role of cinema in changing historical perceptions towards pirates.

The fourth chapter will address the historical subject knights. Similar to the pirate theme, changes in historical culture regarding knights are influenced by popular culture and fantasy elements. The historical context within this chapter will address changes in the literary genre regarding knights and how these influenced visualisation of knights in Playmobil. The final chapter will provide a summary of the research, as well as an answer to the research question. Additionally, the final chapter will explore the interconnectivity between these themes.

2 Myths of the Wild West: The Indian and Manifest Destiny

In 1994, Playmobil introduced a new set called *2 Südstaatler/Fahne*, Figure 2-1 which remained on the market until 1998. The title of the set perfectly captures its content: two soldiers from the southern states holding a Confederate flag. The fact that Playmobil made a conscious choice to publish this set is interesting as the Confederate flag remains a controversial symbol. The flag is rooted in cultural symbolism and has long stood as a powerfully divisive emblem in the United States. Its key supporters are ideological conservatives, while the flag is opposed by those who view it as a symbol of racism and white supremacy from the Old South.⁴⁸ The fact that Playmobil once manufactured a set featuring a Confederate flag would be unthinkable in today's political and cultural climate. As of today such a product would align Playmobil with ideological conservatism, inadvertently giving a political favour to their brand. Changing perceptions in representation of historical symbols, such as the Confederate Flag, are linked to changes in historical culture. Historical culture reciprocates the ways in which societies relate to their collective past and how these ideas are integrated into their present. As stated before, historical culture is subject to change and is dependent on the current cultural climate. When societal norms and values change regarding historical events, popular historical culture changes with them. This chapter will explore how Playmobil represents the Indians and American cavalry as a historical theme within its toy sets, to understand and explain changes in visualisation in historical culture with a particular focus on postcolonial critique.

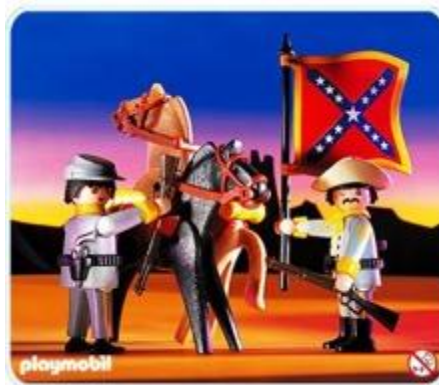


Figure 2-1: Playmobil, „2 Südstaatler/Fahne,“ 3783. <https://www.klickypedia.com/sets/3783-mounted-rebels/>

⁴⁸ Ryan D. Talbert, 'Culture and the Confederate Flag: Attitudes toward a Divisive Symbol', *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 2 (2017): e12454, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12454>.

The Playmobil set of the two southern soldiers is part of the Western play theme manufactured by Playmobil. The Wild West, or Western, theme has been a core part of Playmobil's productions since the company's inception in 1974, as seen in Figure 2-2, which shows the distribution of Playmobil's historical themes. The prominence of the Indians during Playmobil's early offerings highlight the significance of the theme. Notably, one of the Indian figures is featured on the front page of the first catalogue. The Wild West theme essentially lost its popularity during the start of the twentieth century, but despite the theme's absence in the catalogues, Playmobil continued to publish and republish sets related to the Western theme. The visualisation of the Wild West within these sets is constructed through myths in popular culture, that are created and reinforced through films, television, literatures and advertising. Understanding the representation and visualisation of the Wild West in toys is crucial because toys are powerful tools that shape how children perceive the world. As Christina Welch observes, "toys inform how children see and understand the world, and for European children, the Indians largely comprises of feather bonnets, teepees, and totem poles."⁴⁹ The portrayal of historical figures and themes in toys reflects broader cultural narratives and shifts in these representations can reveal important changes in societal values and perceptions.

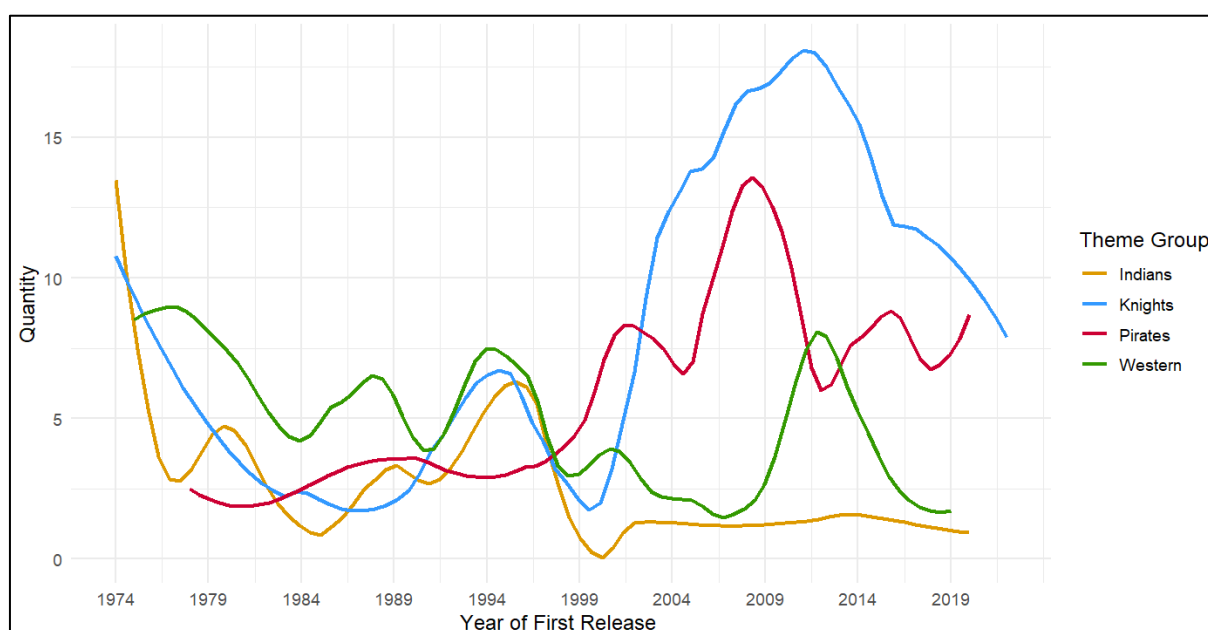


Figure 2-2: Distribution of Playmobil's Historical Themes, 1974-2022. Made using RStudio

⁴⁹ Christina Welch, 'Teepees and Totem Poles: Toy Representations of North American Indians in European Popular Culture for Children', in *Tribal Fantasies: Native Americans In The European Imaginary, 1900–2010*, by James Mackay and David Stirrup (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). 112.

The Western theme in Playmobil includes a variety of elements, and can be categorised in three historical subthemes; first the visualisation of Indians and the American cavalry, second the Western habitat, and thirdly the visualisation of the Gold Rush that is added towards the end of the twentieth century. The western theme include Western-style buildings, train stations, cowboys, bandits, American soldiers and Indian figures. These themes are often represented in the catalogues in relation to each other. This chapter will explore the first two most prominent themes: the visualisation of the Indians and the American cavalry. It will examine how these two subjects are interconnected and how they reflect changing postcolonial critique. In doing so, it will address the following question: *What shifts in representations of the “Wild West” are visible in Playmobil catalogues since 1974, and what was the impact of postcolonial criticism on these shifts in representation?*

2.1 Historical Context: The Indians, Manifest Destiny and Frontier myth

As stated before the Indians are prominently featured in the catalogues during the second half of the twentieth century. This is result of what is often referred to as “Indian Enthusiasm”.⁵⁰ Indian enthusiasm is quite a big phenomenon in German culture. This can be explained through the cultural impact of the trilogy *Winnetou* written by the German writer Karl May in the nineteenth century. May published a trilogy about a Native American called Winnetou and his German friend Old Shatterhand. The cultural impact and influence of the trilogy on Germanies popular culture was enormous: multiple films and series were produced and it also inspired festivals. Additionally, May’s work was the inspiration for generations of children’s games and made the Indian an iconic figure in German culture.⁵¹ Festivals celebrating the trilogy of May are still annually held to this day in Germany.⁵² In light of this, in German-speaking countries references to America are often automatically associated with the trilogy by May, and other myths about the Wild West. Thus, in Germany there is a deep-rooted attraction to native American historical themes, resulting in the creation of a romanticised Indian figure.⁵³ The romanticised representation allows for a profitable and marketable representation of Indians.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Calloway, Gemünden, and Zantop, *Germans and Indians*.

⁵¹ Jeffrey L. Sammons, 10. *Germany’s Americans: Old Shatterhand and Winnetou* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁵² A. Dana Weber, *Blood Brothers and Peace Pipes: Performing the Wild West in German Festivals* (Madison, UNITED STATES: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019).

⁵³ Weber. 4.

⁵⁴ Calloway, Gemünden, and Zantop, *Germans and Indians*. 169.

The popularity of May's trilogy as well as the commodification of the Indian provide an explanation for their prominence in the first catalogues and their relative popularity throughout the 50 years of Playmobil production.

This creation of an universal Indian figure is built upon misrepresentations of the Native American culture reiterated in popular culture, particularly the Plains-style peoples.⁵⁵ This visualisation of Indians, has reduced Native American culture to a commodifiable product, in which Indians are represented with featured bonnets, teepees and canoes.⁵⁶ Alongside this stereotypical presentation, there is often historical inaccuracy in the portrayal of Native Americans, as the peoples are homogenized. The result of this is the misrepresentation of different native peoples, as they are all usually depicted with the same accessories; tipis, canoes, and totems leading to inaccurate homogenizing of artifacts.⁵⁷ The impact of these colonial narratives is visible too in the representation and prominence of the Indians in Playmobil, especially the homogenization of Native American culture and the universal Indian that stems from this. Within this colonial representation Native Americans are often represented as primitive savages and the antagonistic enemy, opposed to the Cowboys or American cavalry who are representations of important American values, such as individualism, fairness, love for freedom and forward looking attitude.⁵⁸ Consequently, these representations depict the Indian culture as the inferior culture in regards to the white colonizer's claim of superiority.⁵⁹

In contrast to the universal stereotypes of Indian characters, the Indian character Winnetou in the trilogy by May was presented as the 'good guy.' Herein May can be understood as a product of his time, as many other writers within the Enlightenment legacy often represented the Native as a "noble savage."⁶⁰ The noble savage served as a model of human behaviour and a kind of screen for moral ideas, depicting a figure with whom one could sympathise. For May the noble savage represented the idea that Indians embodied an inherent nobility and could lift humanity to a higher state of human nature and spiritual awareness.⁶¹ This is reiterated in the novels through Winnetou's character whose spirit of

⁵⁵ Welch, 'Teepees and Totem Poles: Toy Representations of North American Indians in European Popular Culture for Children'. 102.

⁵⁶ Michael Yellow Bird, 'Cowboys and Indians: Toys of Genocide, Icons of American Colonialism', *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (2004): 33–48. 39.

⁵⁷ Welch, 'Teepees and Totem Poles: Toy Representations of North American Indians in European Popular Culture for Children'.

⁵⁸ Bird, 'Cowboys and Indians'. 43.

⁵⁹ Bird. 43.

⁶⁰ Karl Markus Kreis, 'German Wild West: Karl May's Invention of the Definitive Indian', in *I Like America: Fictions of the Wild West*, ed. Pamela Kort and Max Hollein (Munich: Prestel verlag, 2006). 249.

⁶¹ Kreis. 250.

noble humanity could transcend the fate faced by many Native Americans at the time, as most were moved onto reserves to provide land for white colonialist.⁶² In his novels May idealizes some Native Americans, but also represents others as corrupt and coarse. He also addresses some of the evils of colonialism, but ties these to individual actions thereby not addressing the systemic ills.⁶³

Another important part of the visualisation of Indians in historical culture that needs further explanation is their relation to the American cavalry. In popular culture the visualisation of the Wild West and Indians, is often related to the American Indian Wars in which the concept Manifest Destiny plays a significant role. Manifest Destiny is a concept created in mid-nineteenth century America and was coined by O'Sullivan, a New York journalist of Irish decent.⁶⁴ The term indicates that the United States had a God-sanctioned mission to expand their territory. This legitimised the territorial expansion of the United States, as it was their destiny.⁶⁵ According to the term Manifest Destiny, the United States was destined to be the nation of human progress, and its mission was to spread this principle limitless. The Americans imposed ideals such as independence, liberty and democracy, thereby also claiming to be a superior culture over other peoples living in the Americas.⁶⁶ America considered itself as a new kind of society. These ideas justified their removal of Native American populations from their hereditary lands, all in the name of Manifest Destiny.⁶⁷

The Manifest Destiny myth is closely tied to ideas of the frontier. Originally the idea of the frontier is that the Americans would create a new and untested civilisation. The frontier symbolises the last part of civilization before the colonist reached what they understood to be the virgin wilderness. The idea of the Frontier began to shape the Americans in a revolutionary way. As the Americans started to see themselves as the only dominant people that would carry forward civilisation and spread progress. This idea of the frontier implanted a new spirit within the colonizers one in which the colonisers understood themselves as self-proclaimed, self-reliant and individual actors. These ideas of individualism and democracy developed into ideas

⁶² William Steven Bradley, 'I Like America: Imagined German Encounters with the American West from Karl May to Joseph Beuys', in *A Seamless Web: Transatlantic Art in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Cheryl May and Marian Wardle (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013). 62.

⁶³ Weber, *Blood Brothers and Peace Pipes*. 10.

⁶⁴ Robert Walter Johannsen, Sam W. Haynes, and Christopher Morris, *Manifest Destiny and Empire : American Antebellum Expansionism*, vol. 1st ed, The Walter Prescott Webb Memorial Lectures (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 7.

⁶⁵ Johannsen, Haynes, and Morris. 10.

⁶⁶ Wilber W. Caldwell, *American Narcissism: The Myth of National Superiority* (New York, UNITED STATES: Agora Publishing, 2006), 46.

⁶⁷ Caldwell. 86.

of American superiority, and consequently created the myths of the American frontiersman. The American frontiersman resembles a restless pioneer, who is led by American exceptionalism.⁶⁸ In the context of the frontier myth Indians are often portrayed as a barrier that limited the speed and direction of the white people's westward movement.⁶⁹

Towards the end of the twentieth century, during the period often referred to in academics as the cultural turn, debates arose in cultural settings regarding the representations of the Indian. These debates can be understood in light of rising postcolonial critique, a field of analysis that examines the cultural, political and economic impacts of colonialism. Additionally, postcolonial critique also addresses the enduring effects of imperial rule on colonised societies. One of these effects for the Native American culture was the continuous cultural stigmatisation embedded in the Indian. As explained in the historical context above these visuals were often embedded in stereotypical imagery such as the noble savage and used the Indians as an antagonist for the reiteration of the Frontier myth and Manifest Destiny.⁷⁰ In light of these debates questions arose regarding the representation, inclusion and ownership of the Indians stereotypical image in popular culture.⁷¹

One of these postcolonial critiques was focused on ownership and representation of Native American culture. In visual representations of the Indian during this period there is often an unspoken and unconscious assumption that everyone owned these narratives. As commercial products and advertising often used images of Native Americans and the Native American culture, further fostering and nurturing the stereotypical image of the Indian. The visualisation of Indians was, as explained before, understood as a universal commodity. Richard King reiterates this; "Indianness is a national heritage; it is a fond for commercial enterprise; it is a costume one can put on for a party, a youth activity, or a sporting event."⁷² This global representation of Indianness in popular culture can be quite problematic, as these re-creations and romantic images of Indians commodify their culture. It therefore dismisses thoughts on accurate historical perceptions of Native American culture as well as the actual treatment of Indians during the American expansion.⁷³ On the longer term these questions and discussions

⁶⁸ Caldwell. 35.

⁶⁹ Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier 1846-1890* (Albuquerque, UNITED STATES: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 5.

⁷⁰ Michael K. Green, "Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues," *Journal of Business Ethics* 12, no. 4 (1993): 324.

⁷¹ Green.

⁷² C. Richard King, *Redskins: Insult and Brand* (Lincoln, UNITED STATES: University of Nebraska Press, 2016) 100.

⁷³ King, 101.

on ownership and accurate historical representations began to reshape visual culture regarding the Indian culture, influencing how Indians were visualised within the Western theme.

2.2 Creativity of the Player: 1974 - 1977

During the early years of Playmobil, the Western theme was one of the prominent themes in the catalogues. These first four years of visual representation of Playmobil sets are marked by the emphasis on creative play. Playmobil positions itself as a play system that allows children to engage however they wish. The catalogue of 1975 states “Hier ist der Phantasie keine Grenze gesetzt,” highlighting the freedom of the player to play as he or she desires.⁷⁴ Beside the textual narration, this notion of the unlimited creativity of the player is also evident in design features. The design of the Playmobil figures, such as their neutral colour and interchangeable accessories allow the figure to take on any role envisioned by the player. This is reiterated in the catalogue too “Mit den lustigen und beweglichen Kleine Spielfiguren kann man immer wieder neue Rollen spielen.”⁷⁵ The core idea of Playmobil is a toy brand that designs their figures, buildings, accessories and vehicles to fit seamlessly together. Meaning that, during the early years the accessories as well as the figures were designed to fit multiple themes. Therefore, the figures received neutral colours such as blue, yellow or red, so that they could be a construction worker, knight or Indians, only by changing the accommodating accessories. This marketing strategy directly influences the visualisation of the historical themes. The early visualisation in the catalogues have a less directed narrative, leaving players with more creative freedom to explore the full potential of the different sets and themes.



Figure 2-3: Playmobil catalogue, 1975.

⁷⁴ Playmobil Catalogues, 1975.

⁷⁵ Playmobil Catalogues, 1977.

This is evident in the visualisation, as seen in Figure 2-3 from the Playmobil catalogue from 1975. The catalogues feature children alongside the visuals, and there is more interactivity between themes. In the catalogue in 1975 the knight and Indian are visualised in an interaction, this stresses the creative fantasy of the player. Supposedly there are no rules the player should follow, as even these two historical periods can interact with each other. Additionally the catalogue also features children in their visualisation emphasizing the role of the child in constructing their own play scene. What is also evident in this catalogue is the influence of Karl May on the visualisation of the Indians. The chant “Hugh – ich habe gesprochen,” is a popular phrase known among all the German readers of the works of Karl May.⁷⁶ During the early years of Playmobil, two things are evident within the visualisation of the historical theme Indians. First off the prominence and popularity of the theme within the catalogues and early offerings, which is related to the German Historical culture in which Indian Enthusiasm is very popular.⁷⁷ This can be explained through the popularity of the trilogy of Karl May, which is also referenced in the catalogues. Second, the narratives within the visualisation are influenced by Playmobil marketing strategy as a toy manufacturing company that want the player to have creative freedom when playing.

2.3 Manifest Destiny and the Frontier myth: 1978 - 1996

After the first four years of Playmobil catalogues, there is a change in the visual representation of the Indian. The visualisation of the Western theme expanded on narrative elements that are reinforced through the denotation of the image, such as the composition, perspective, and usage of colour. These different visual aspects increase the narrative structure and therefore connote more cultural, historical and social narratives to the audience. Specifically, one narrative is structurally recurring: The Indians fighting the American cavalry. The American cavalry were added as a set in the Western theme in 1976 and made an appearance in this catalogue. This narrative structure is one that is continuously reiterated from 1978 onwards.

⁷⁶ Eroms, Hans-Werner, ‘Hugh, ich habe gesprochen,’ in *Sie leben nicht vom Verb allein: Beiträge zur historischen Textanalyse Valenz- und Phraseologieforschung* eds. Hartmut E. H. Lenk, Ulrike Richter-Vapaatalo. Berlin: Frank & Timme. 2015

⁷⁷ Calloway, Gemünden, and Zantop, *Germans and Indians*.



Figure 2-4: Playmobil catalogue, 1978, page 16 and 17.

The addition of this new narrative that represents the Indians attacking the American cavalry can be related to historical myths. The myth that is reiterated in these visualisations is one of the justification of the American expansion often reiterated in popular historical culture. Particularly the Frontier myth, and Manifest Destiny, are reiterated as myth that represent the idea of American exceptionalism within the catalogues. Within these myths the American culture is often seen as superior, and the Native American culture as inferior. Figure 2-4 reiterates these ideas, as in the visualisation the American cavalry are presented as the protectors of the fort.⁷⁸ Additionally, their fort is presented as a permanent establishment, which reinforces their claims for legitimate territorial expansion. Inside the fort there are building reminiscent of a village, suggesting that the American cavalry is protecting them. The village life within the fort connotes ideas of the American family as loving and morally just. As the female portrayed within the fort holds a calm and just posture, making her look like an innocent person, in need of protection. This idea is strengthened through the portrayal of the Indian on the left side as they seem to be chanting and holding more distraught positions. These ideas of manifesting destiny are also strengthened by the visualisation of the American flag, a nationalist symbol that legitimises their claim to be there. All these visuals, including the fort as an establishment, the flag, and the role of the American cavalry as the protectors help to strengthen their claims for legitimacy, and reiterate the manifest destiny myth.

Opposing them are the Indians, who are represented as the attacker. Additionally, it portrays them as savages which is a stereotypical representation of Indians often used in historical culture. Their visualisation of savages can be denotated mainly through their accessories. The Indian warriors are carrying spears, this is often used in visualisation to portray

⁷⁸ Johannsen, Haynes, and Morris, *Manifest Destiny and Empire*.

them as savages as these are primitive weapons, thereby reinforcing historical myths. Additionally, staging the Indians as savage, corresponds with claims often made regarding the colonial context that the Indian culture is inferior. Further emphasized by the fact that they are staged as the one attacking the moral and just establishment of the American cavalry. The supposed inferiority of the Indians is also reiterated in textual narratives; “Werden die Indianer den Siedlerzug noch erreichen. Nein – die soldaten von fort union sind wieder mal schneller.”⁷⁹ This text clearly portrays the American cavalry as the victor in the attacks, reinforcing popular historical myths that depict American culture as superior. The visualisation of the Indians and the American cavalry remains largely consistent over time. The common narrative structure shows Indians attacking a postal carriage on its way to an American fort, where they are visualised as savages, while the Americans are portrayed as protectors and the superior culture. As evident in Figure 2-5, aside from minor visual and stylistic changes, such as increased historical accuracy in clothing and more detailed accessories due to improved manufacturing, the overarching narrative remains largely unchanged



Figure 2-5: Playmobil catalogues, 1993.

In these recurring narrative structures, in the second phase, Indians are frequently portrayed as antagonists. Their prominent role is to justify the claims of legitimacy and Manifest Destiny asserted by the American cavalry. Their own identity as a cultural entity is not acknowledged. The 1986–1987 catalogue (Figure 2-6) exemplifies this dynamic. In this image, the American cavalry is again depicted as the protectors of a postal carriage, in which a man and a woman are seated, adding weight to the assumption of the Americans as the protectors.

⁷⁹ Playmobil Catalogue, 1978. Page 16 and 17.

The Native Americans are shown solely in the role of attackers to highlight the protective nature of the cavalry. They are not represented as a cultural entity, but merely as antagonistic figures in the story of American expansion. This form of narration is similarly in Figures 2-4, 2-5 and 2-6.



Figure 2-6: Playmobil catalogue, 1985-1986, page 26 and 27.

2.4 Representation of Indians as a Cultural Entity: 1996 – 2025

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the Western theme gradually lost prominence in the Playmobil catalogue. After 2003, the Wild West theme is rarely present anymore in the catalogues. While Playmobil continues to produce and sell Western-themed sets, they were no longer actively marketed in catalogues. Moreover, the sets that remained available were often reproductions of older models. Besides, there is a shift in visualisations between the Indians and American cavalry. The Indians and American cavalry are less often represented opposing each other, and there is a larger focus on representation of the Indians. This shift occurred around the mid-1990s. In the catalogue from 1997, Figure 2-7, the Indians and American cavalry are visualised as friends, reiterated in the title “Der Grosse Frieden von Colorado Falls.” Posing a very clear example of the difference in visualisation, as the Indians are no longer used

as antagonists in the story of the American cavalry, but are represented as a cultural entity that engages with the American cavalry, albeit in a stereotypical and ritualistic practices: smoking a peace pipe.



Figure 2-7: Playmobil catalogue, 1997, page 26 and 27.

These shifts in focus on the individual representation of the Indian culture led to a more 'celebratory' image of the Native American culture, although still embedded in a colonialist perspective. The increasingly detailed representation of Indian figure, including greater detailing in their depictions reflect these changes. A closer look at the Indian figures in Figure 2-8 reveals that they all occupy distinct hierarchical roles and perform specific actions. For example, the elderly male figure wearing a feathered headdress and seated in front of the tipi is depicted as the chief. Another male figure, positioned atop the rocks with a spear, is portrayed as the warrior. His distinct headdress and black eye stripes indicate that he is ready to hunt. Additionally, a Native American figure in a canoe is shown guiding a white character seemingly representing the classic frontier adventurer. The female figures too assume a role, as mother carrying the children. These more elaborate and nuanced portrayals, with defined roles and unique accessories, although still stereotypical representations of Indians, can be understood in the context of emerging critique regarding Indigenous representation. In the Figure 2-7 and 2-8, the Indians are represented as a single cultural entity, and not as an antagonist in the American Indian Wars evident in the previous period. Despite the visualisation of Indians as a cultural entity it is important to stress that the visualisation is still embedded in stereotypical practices.

The Indians represented in the image are still reminiscent of the stereotypical Indian plains people including the feather bonnets, teepees, and totem poles.⁸⁰



Figure 2-8: Playmobil catalogue, 1996, page 32 and 33.

Within these later visualisations, May's representation of the noble savage is more evident. May was attracted to Native American culture, because according to May it embodied inherent nobility, and could lift humanity to a higher state of human nature and spiritual awareness. This is reiterated in the novels through Winnetou's character whose spirit of noble humanity could transcend the fait faced by many Native Americans.⁸¹ This representation of Indians as inherently noble and in tune with nature is often linked to the idea of a noble savage. This is visible in Figure 2-9, that shows the visualisation of Indians in the Playmobil catalogue of 1999. The Indians are surrounded by nature and cultural artifacts. Accessories such as the totem pole, teepees and smoke signals represent the Indians spirituality and their connection to nature. Take for example the first tent, in which there are three male Indians of the middle one resembles a chief, and the other two resemble the warriors this distinction is visible through their different headdresses. They seem to be smoking a peace pipe together often presented as a ritualistic and spiritual activity. The ritualisation corresponds with the visualisation of the noble savage as a people that are spiritually orientated. Additionally, the visuals feature different

⁸⁰ Welch, 'Teepees and Totem Poles: Toy Representations of North American Indians in European Popular Culture for Children'.

⁸¹ Bradley, 'I Like America: Imagined German Encounters with the American West from Karl May to Joseph Beuys'. P. 62

sorts of animals surrounding the Indian people in the background, also indicating their relationship with nature.

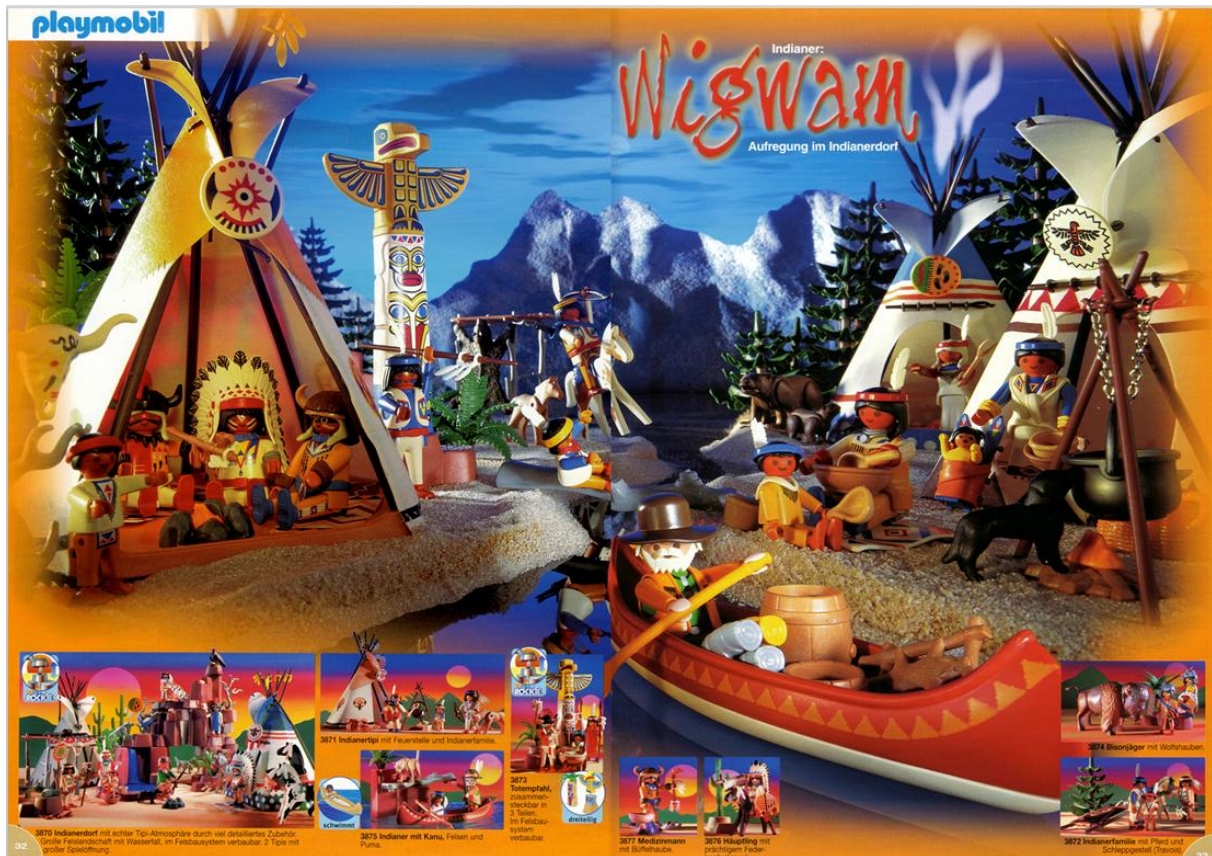


Figure 2-9: Playmobil catalogue, 1999, page 32 and 33.

These changes in visualisation can be explained in regards to postcolonial criticism, particularly problems around ownership of the representation of Native American culture.⁸² This is an explanation for the changing narratives and lack of visualisation of Indian culture after the twenty-first century. After 2003 the Indians were not visualised within the catalogues anymore.

Overall, the last phase is characterised by the idea of the Indian culture as a cultural entity. Although the visual representations in the catalogues are still very evidently tied to stereotypical representation and colonial constructs of the Indians, they are represented as a cultural entity. Within this representation there are links to the idea of the noble savage, reiterated in the popular trilogy of Karl May. After 2003 the visualisation of the Indian culture disappears from the catalogue which can be explained due to shift in historical culture regarding

⁸²Green, 'Images of Native Americans in Advertising'.

question of ownership. However, Indian sets are still produced and sold with a larger focus on an accurate representation of the Indian culture.

2.5 Conclusion

The visualisation of the Western theme in the Playmobil catalogues is significantly influenced by shifts in historical culture particularly regarding postcolonial criticism. In the first phase, the prominence of the Indian theme can be explained through the fascination of Native Americans in German historical culture at the time. During this phase, Indians were often depicted as primitive figures. However, narrativity was largely absent in this period due to Playmobil's marketing strategy, which emphasized the interactivity between themes and encouraged freedom and creativity in play, rather than presenting cohesive storylines. This changed in the second phase, during which more explicit narratives emerged, influenced by popular cultural representations of Indians. In these narratives, Indians are portrayed as savages and their primary role is as antagonists within the broader framework of the Frontier myth and the ideology of Manifest Destiny. These depictions reinforced the role of the American cavalry as protectors. The third phase marked a shift in focus as a result of postcolonial critique regarding cultural ownership and representation. Influenced by the postcolonial criticism, critical discussions in academics emerged regarding the stereotypical portrayals of Native American culture. As a result, the Indians in the catalogues were visualised more as cultural entities. Although these visuals were still embedded in colonial narratives, there was a growing recognition of Indians as more than just antagonistic figures. Toward the end of this phase, visualisation of Indians ceased altogether, reflecting growing concerns about the legitimacy of companies like Playmobil in representing and profiting from Indigenous cultures.

To answer the question, *What shifts in representations of the "Wild West" are visible in Playmobil catalogues since 1974, and what was the impact of postcolonial criticism on these shifts in representation?* The themes are visualised through the lens of stereotypical and cultural myths prevalent in historical culture. Herin the construct of the Indian is used to depict them as primitive savages. This is particularly evident in the first and second phase. In the third phase the Indians are acknowledge as a cultural group and not just visualised as the antagonist in American frontier myths. However, these representations are still embedded in colonial stereotypical narratives. Overall, postcolonial criticism influenced these changes in visualisation in two ways. First, by encouraging a more 'celebratory' visualisation of Indians as

a distinct cultural entity. Second, by raising critical questions about cultural ownership and whether a toy company like Playmobil should profit from and represent Native American culture.

The visualisation of Indians in Playmobil catalogues reflects broader changes in historical culture. The following chapter will explore how historical myths and cinematic interpretation of pirates influenced the visualisation of the pirate theme in the Playmobil Catalogue.

3. Historical Myth to Fantasy in Playmobil's Pirates

In 2010, Playmobil released a set called *Geisterpiraten*, visible in Figure 3-1. This set featured three ghostly pirate figures, and can be supplemented with a ghost ship. Although pirate ships have been a staple of Playmobil's pirate theme since 1979, this particular set was different as the figures glowed in the dark and when positioned in the dark revealed a skeleton. Additionally, the ship was visualised in the catalogues as though it was meant to sail underwater. The design and concept of the *Geisterpiratenschiff* are inspired by the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film series, particularly the first film, *The Curse of the Black Pearl*. In this film, Davy Jones and his cursed crew transform into skeletons under the moonlight, this idea is clearly echoed in Playmobil's ghost pirate set where the figures reveal a glow in the dark skeleton. The similarity of the Playmobil set with the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film reflects the broader influence of cinema on the visualisation of pirates in toys. Popular pirate films like *Pirates of the Caribbean* have assumed an important role in shaping visualisations of pirates, these cinematic representations often foster and nurture the visualisation of pirates. As previously discussed, understanding these influences help to anchor certain changes in historical culture. This chapter will discuss the influence of cinema on the visualisation of pirates in the Playmobil catalogues.



Figure 3-1: *Geisterpiraten*, 4800-A, [Geisterpiraten - 4800-A | PLAYMOBIL®](#).

The *Geisterpiratenschiff* set created by Playmobil is part of the Playmobil pirate play world. Playmobil has been producing pirate figures and ships since 1979. The pirate theme became particularly popular after the 2000s, as evident in Figure 2-2. The sets related to the theme often include ships, treasure maps, treasure islands, pirate figures, parrots and other exotic animals. These accessories and sets are influenced by popular Caribbean piracy tropes in historical culture. Popular conceptions about Caribbean piracy in cinema often visualise the pirate as a romanticised and adventurous figure, this image is created through a mix of historical facts and fiction about Caribbean piracy. Regarding the visualisation of the pirate theme in Playmobil, a change can be identified across two periods; in the first phase pirates are represented according to historical myths inspired by films such as *Treasure Island*, while the second period there is an increase of fantasy and magical elements inspired by films such as *Pirates of the Caribbean*. This chapter will provide an analysis of these two periods and answer the following question: *How does Playmobil's representation of pirates in their catalogues since 1979 reflect changing cultural understandings of pirates, and what was the role of cinema in this process?*

3.1 Historical Context: *Treasure Island*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*

Popular historical themes, such as pirates, are often embedded in historical culture. They align with common historical perceptions about pirates.⁸³ The result of this is a blend between a fictional and factional character of historical pirates. This section will not focus on the verification and accuracy of the pirates' image that is conveyed in Playmobil themes, but rather understand how the pirate image is influenced by cinema with a particular emphasis on two influential films *Treasure Island*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

The historical period often referenced in the visualisation of pirates in historical culture is the so called “Golden Age of Piracy” in the 17th and 18th century. The ‘Golden Age’ owes its name to raids and myths carried out by pirates like Henry Morgan, Henry Every, and William Kidd. Additionally, in historical sources regarding the Golden Age of Piracy these captains are often mythologised as charismatic “great men,” a tendency that persists in modern popular

⁸³ Wolfgang Buchberger, “‘Yo, Ho, Ho Und 'ne Buddel Voll Rum!’ Piratenbilder in Spielzeug Und Spiel’, in *Mit Geschichte Spielen: Zur Materiellen Kultur von Spielzeug Und Spielen Als Darstellung Der Vergangenheit* Ed. Christoph Kühberger, by Christoph Kühberger (bielefeld, 2021). 182.

culture.⁸⁴ During this period both legitimate and illegitimate forms of sea fare plundering reached intercontinental proportions, turning the Caribbeans into a the centre of pirate activity around the 1650s.⁸⁵ In academic literature there is a discussion on the exact time frame of the Golden Age, depending on how they define piracy and which events they emphasise. Generally, the Golden Age is considered to have spanned from the 1650s to the 1720s.⁸⁶ During the peak of Caribbean piracy an estimate of 2,000 pirates were active on both sides of the Atlantic.⁸⁷ Joint maritime efforts by European powers, such as convoy protection and pirate hunting, eventually ended the so-called Golden age of piracy. During this period pirate myths began to form. For instance, in 1700, after an English naval vessel pursued a ship under captain Emanuel Wynn, reports emerged of pirates sailing under the infamous Jolly Roger. The Jolly Roger is a black flag decorated with symbols often associated with death such as skulls, crossbones, hourglasses, and bleeding hearts. This flag soon became symbolic for the representation of pirates as violent and dangerous.⁸⁸

The romanticised version of the pirate stems from the Golden Age of Piracy. This romanticised version is a product of more than three centuries of storytelling. Particularly, the 19th century can be understood as the foundation for the romanticised narrative of pirates.⁸⁹ Influential works, such as *Treasure Island* and the narrative poem *The Corsair* illustrate the transformation of the pirate image from a villain to a romantic outlaw.⁹⁰ The literary illustrations of pirates are visualised by the artwork of American artist Howard Pyle, who played a major role in shaping the pirate image. In his illustrations he visualised pirates with headscarves and sashes over ragged clothing, along with a captain wearing a tri-cornered hat and a long coat.⁹¹ Pyle's illustrations had a significant influence on the public perception of pirates. These illustrations were later used by filmmakers as inspiration for their pirate characters.

One of the most influential sources in pirate visualisation is based on the literary work *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, first published in 1881. The novel was written as

⁸⁴ Gabriel Kuhn, 'Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age of Piracy' (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2020).

⁸⁵ Buchberger, "'Yo, Ho, Ho Und 'ne Buddel Voll Rum!'" Piratenbilder in Spielzeug Und Spiel'. 183

⁸⁶ Gabriel Kuhn, '1. Background', in *Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age Piracy* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2010).

⁸⁷ Kuhn.

⁸⁸ Kuhn, 'Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age of Piracy'.

⁸⁹ David Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among Pirates* (New York: Random House, 1995).

⁹⁰ Buchberger, "'Yo, Ho, Ho Und 'ne Buddel Voll Rum!'" Piratenbilder in Spielzeug Und Spiel'. 184

⁹¹ Miroslaw Michal Sadowski, 'Pirate Imageries and the Law: Utopias, Seven Seas and Sunken Treasures', *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 38, no. 4 (2024): 1357–95. P 136.1

an adventurous story for children and was soon adapted into stage plays and several films. The most iconic film adaption was in the 1950s, starring Robert Newton as Long John Silver. His role marked the visualisation of pirates in popular culture.⁹² The movie adaption of Stevenson's story, popularised many well-known pirate elements such as treasure maps marked by an X, buried treasures, tropical islands, punishment of walking the plank and peg-legged sailors with talking parrots on their shoulder. Additionally, the movie added to common perception regarding the way pirates talk. In the movie Robert Newton emphasised the growling 'r' sound, thereby creating the now prevalent "arrr" sounds of pirates.⁹³ Another characteristic that Stevensons attributes to pirates and is reinforced in the movie is the large alcohol consumption of pirates. In *Treasure Island* the pirates are often portrayed as jovial characters according to how drunk they are.⁹⁴ Beside these visual aspects, *Treasure Island* also associated pirates with the narratives of scavenger hunts on tropical island in which the pirates hope to find treasure chests with gold and silver.⁹⁵ The cinematic adoption of *Treasure Island* was a massive influence on the visualisation of pirates. After this short boom of pirate films in the 1950s the pirate genre quickly lost its appeal.⁹⁶

While pirate-themed films saw a decline in popularity during the 1990s, the genre experienced a major resurgence in the early 2000s, most notably with Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean*. This film had a significant impact on the visualisation of pirates. In the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films the focus on historical myth began to decline, giving way to an increased emphasis on the addition of mythical and supernatural elements. These movies introduced a radically new depiction of pirates and their world, blending historical references with fantasy, adventure and supernatural elements. For example, the first movie *The Curse of the Black Pearl*, still reiterates historical myths by presenting pirates as violent, jovial and free characters thereby framing the pirate as the outlaw which is a common perception in historical culture.⁹⁷ However, besides these historical myth fantasy elements are added. For example, in the first movie the pirate crew with main characters, Will Turner, governors daughter Elizabeth Swann, and Jack Sparrow, are up against a cursed pirate crew of Barbarossa who turn into ghosts once the sun

⁹² Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among Pirates*. 5.

⁹³ Sadowski, 'Pirate Imageries and the Law: Utopias, Seven Seas and Sunken Treasures'. P. 1361.

⁹⁴ Benerson Little, 'Prologue The Image of the Pirate', in *The Golden Age of Piracy; The Truth Behind Pirate Myths* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016).

⁹⁵ Under the black flag

⁹⁶ Susanne Zhanial, *Postmodern Pirates: Tracing the Development of the Pirate Motif with Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). P. 250.

⁹⁷ Surya R. Malolo, Augustine C. Mamentu, and Delli Sabudu, 'The Impact of Piracy in Elizabeth Rudnick's *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*', *SoCul: International Journal of Research in Cultural Issues* 2, no. 3 (n.d.).

sets.⁹⁸ In the film Johnny Depp gives an eccentric performance as Captain Jack Sparrow which in turn reenergised the genre, introducing a new generation to the Pirate trope. This renewed visualisation of the pirate genre includes a more exaggerated and fantasy visualisation of the pirates.⁹⁹ Particularly, the supernatural elements created through special effects, such as cursed pirates, cursed treasures and mythical creatures formed the renewed visualisation.

3.2 Creativity of the Player: 1978-1979

The first release of pirates as a Playmobil theme was in 1979, three years after the inception of the toy manufacturer. The first set included a pirate ship, the Jolly Roger flag, canons and a small boat for the pirates to get on land. Figure 3-2 shows the first pirate ship manufactured by Playmobil, evidently this ship alone reiterates historical myths. First off, the crow's nest reinforces the idea that pirates are always on the watch for enemy ships or treasure islands, a popular trope reinforced by stories such as *Treasure Island*. Secondly, the Jolly Roger flag waving on top off the ship is a clear symbol that reinforces historical myths of pirates as fearsome and rebellious outlaws. The pirate figures also reiterate common historical perceptions about pirates as they are designed in accordance with popular pirate illustrations starting with the illustrations of Howard Pyle. Similar to his illustrations the pirates wear a tri-cornered hat, and a scarf

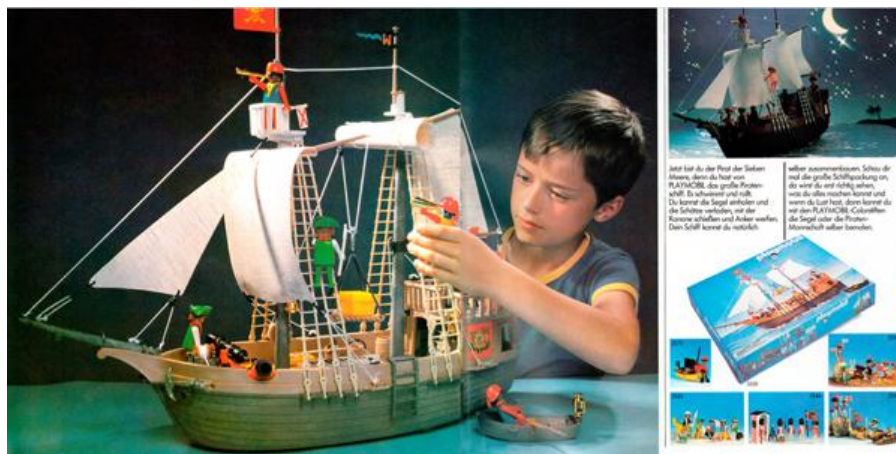


Figure 3-2: Playmobil catalogue, 1978-1979, page 16 and 17.

So the first visualisation of pirates by Playmobil in Figure 3-2 already reiterates some common historical perceptions at the time regarding pirates. However, besides these design

⁹⁸ Malolo, Mamentu, and Sabudu.

⁹⁹ Zhanial, *Postmodern Pirates: Tracing the Development of the Pirate Motif with Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean*.

element that reiterate historical myths there is not a narrative present. This is due to Playmobil's marketing strategy as argued in the previous chapter. During the first years of Playmobil, they wanted to profile themselves as a company in which the player had the freedom to narrate their own stories, the visualisations were therefore focused on the creativity and fantasy of the player. As a consequence, Figure 3-2 does not present a distinctive narrative. Rather, it depicts a child as an active participant in playing with the toys, emphasizing the freedom and creativity of the player. Additionally, the pirate figures, aside from their recognizable hats and scarfs, are designed using neutral colours. These neutral colours allow players to mix and match accessories from other themes, enabling the same figure to take on different roles.

3.3 Representation of Historical Myths; 1979-1996

From 1979 onwards a particular narrative is often reiterated in pirate visualisation, one where the pirates are nested on a tropical island while being attacked by the Royal Navy. For example, the catalogue from 1981-1982 reiterates this narrative. In this catalogue, Figure 3-3, depicts the British Royal Navy, visible through their distinct British attire and the flag on top of the ship. In the visualisation the Royal Navy attacks a pirate nest who are hiding on an island. This reinforces the historical myths of pirates as outlaws, since they are constantly hunted by naval forces. What also reinforces these myths of pirates as outlaws is their visualisation on an exotic island with palm trees and rock, visualising a pirate nest. Exotic islands are often featured in pirate visualisation in films, particularly *Treasure Island* is known for reiterating these myths of pirates hiding on exotic island finding treasures. Additionally, the textual reference to Captain Flint, "Die Koenigliche Marine hat ein Piratennest aufgestöbert. Kapt'n Flint's letztes Stundlein hat geschlagen." can also be explained through references in historical culture. The parrot of one of the main characters in *Treasure Island*, Long John Silver, was called Cap'n Flint, named after his former captain. The textual narrative also reinforces the historical myths of pirates on exotic island hideouts, by stating "Piratennest", and the idea of pirates always battling the authority. Evidently, Figure 3-3 is the first visualisation by Playmobil that reiterates pirate tropes popularised in cinematic interpretations such as *Treasure Island*.



Figure 3-3: Playmobil catalogue, 1981-1982, page 12.

Besides this reoccurring narrative shown in Figure 3-3, another important character is introduced by Playmobil that reinforces popular pirate myths. In the catalogue of 1987, Figure 3-4, introduced the pirate captain. The pirate captain is a figure that is often included in historical myth as a 'great man'. This is the first figure produced by Playmobil that has a larger belly. Besides the belly, the figure carries a round edged sword, a curved hat, an eye patch, and a red beard. The larger belly of the pirate conforms to the myth of the pirate captain as a jovial and often drunk figure. This historical myth is a popular pirate narrative often reiterated in cinematic presentation such as *Treasure Island*.¹⁰⁰ Introducing such a distinct captain figure is compatible with historical myth, that often reiterate the pirate captains as 'great men.' The assumption of the pirates as a captain is also reinforced through his place in the composition within the catalogue, as the pirate captain assumes a central spot on the pirate ship. His position together with his distinct outfit makes him recognizable as the pirate captain.

¹⁰⁰ Little, 'Prologue The Image of the Pirate'.



Figure 3-4: Playmobil catalogue, 1987, page 2 and 3.

The catalogue from 1991-1992, in Figure 3-5, exemplifies the argument that the same historical narrative is reiterated. In this visualisation the Royal Navy finds and attacks a pirate nest. Although a similar narrative is presented, Playmobil introduced a new set to the visualisation, visible on the right side of Figure 3-5, creating a separation between the two vessels. In the visualisation and production of sets before, there was one ship that could be used as the pirate ship as well as the Royal Navy, indicating the versatile nature of the ship. In 1991-1992 Playmobil introduced a new set inspired by designs from the British East India Company. The ship in Figure 3-2 includes a code of arms that resembles the British East India code of arms, thereby indicating that the vessel is reserved for the Royal Navy. This separation of ships in turn also influences the historical myths represented in the narrative. The new ships make stronger claims to a colonial past, thereby emphasising classical historical myths of outlawed pirates versus the authoritative navy. Creating such an opposition reiterates the classic narrative of outlaws versus the authority. This narrative of outlaws is further strengthened by the addition of the treasure island. The treasure island, as stated before, is often utilised in the creation of

pirate toys, as it offers a more adventurous alternative for the violent activities of the pirate. Additionally, it positions the pirates as figures that have full, albeit chaotic, freedom.¹⁰¹ The featuring of exotic animals, such as the monkey on the left, can also be understood regarding larger trends in historical myth and cinematic interpretations. As these animals are often presented alongside pirates in regards to myths that pirates would capture exotic animals in order to sell them on European commercial markets.¹⁰²



Figure 3-5: Playmobil catalogue, 1991-1992, page 12 and 13.

In the second phase, it is evident that the narratives created by Playmobil are heavily influenced by historical myths, as well as cinematic interpretations. This is evident because of two factors. First off the pirates are portrayed as historical figures who engage in conflict with European forces. These historical myths can be understood as an allusion to the Golden Age of Piracy during which the colonial forces often hunted for pirates. In this visualisation the pirates can be perceived as outlawed, they are the ones hiding on the exotic island which generates the perception that they are the ones hiding from the law. The perception is reinforced by the fact that the pirates are the ones being attacked by the colonial forces, who are depicted as the authority thereby automatically casting their opponents as lacking authority. Beside these

¹⁰¹ Buchberger, “‘Yo, Ho, Ho Und 'ne Buddel Voll Rum!’” *Piratenbilder in Spielzeug Und Spiel*. 186.

¹⁰² Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among Pirates*.

reiterations of historical myths, the influence of pirate visualisation in cinematic interpretation is also visible. One of the most influential sources that can be recognised in the visualisation of pirates is the film adaptation *Treasure Island*. The depiction of pirates created in *Treasure Island*, reflects myths about pirates as adventurous outlaws. The film *Treasure Island* was famous for linking the idea of piracy to finding treasures on deserted island, as well as the carrying of exotic animals. This trope is particularly recognisable in the early visualisations of pirates in the catalogues, as well as the pirate related sets Playmobil created.

3.4 The Fantasy Turn; 1996-2025

From the mid-1990s onwards there is an increase addition of mythical elements in the Playmobil themes. These kind of mythical additions in the pirate theme have a significant influence on the visualisation of pirates within Playmobil. Additionally, advancements in visual effects and techniques contributed to this shift. The use of special effects and stylised visuals enhance the narrative by making the visual more dynamic and engaging. For example, in the 1999 catalogue, Figure 3-6, denotative elements, such as the dark background, and the leaf blocking the view on the left side, further enhance the mystical effect of the catalogue. In particular, the leaf suggests that the viewer is observing the island from a concealed vantage point, thereby stressing the visuals ominous and adventurous tone. The textual narrative reinforces this mysterious tone with the title of the catalogue stating: “Piraten: Die Rache der geheimnisvollen Schatzinsel.” Besides the stylistic and textual aspect, the visual elements reiterate this narrative too. On the left side of Figure 3-6, there is a cave with a face carved into it, the cave is surrounded by lush greenery transforming the familiar image of the treasure island, as visualised in the previous phase, into a mythical scene. Thereby, marking a clear shift from earlier portrayals, in which the island was visualised in accordance with historical myths and cinematic interpretations. Similarly, Figure 3-7, shows an upgraded visualisation of the same theme represented in Figure 3-6. In Figure 3-7, that contains a similar textual narrative as Figure 3-6, a mythical cave is represented. The cave includes a lock that shows mythical symbols that need to be solved in order for the pirates to get to the treasure. The visualisation reiterates a new more adventurous perceptions of the pirate theme. Additionally, the colours and stylistic elements, such as the glooming sun and darker background, also reinforce the mystical, adventurous, and ominous feeling.



Figure 3-6: Playmobil catalogue, 1999, page 34 and 35.



Figure 3-7: Playmobil catalogue, 2011, page 34 and 35.

Notably, one figure, visible in Figure 3-7 on the bottom left, sparked controversy, especially in the United States, after a mother noticed its resemblance to an enslaved person. The figure came with an accessory that resembled a slave collar, along with instructions to place the grey choker around its neck. Additionally, the figure had dark skin, black hair, and was barefoot. In a reaction to the *Washington Post* Playmobil stated; “The figure was meant to represent a pirate who was a former slave in a historical context. It was not our intention to offend anyone in anyway.”¹⁰³ They also emphasized that the visuals on the box clearly show the figure as a member of the ship’s crew, not a captive. The mother’s reaction is understandable given the painful historical context of the transatlantic slave trade. As Bowersox points out, Playmobil’s designs are deeply shaped by social and cultural perspectives, which can sometimes result in the exclusion or marginalization of certain groups.¹⁰⁴

These fantastical and mythical elements can be understood as a direct result of changes in pirate visualisation in popular culture. Specifically the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*, was influential in pirate visualisation. For example, in the set overview of Playmobil in 2007, Figure 3-8, an octopus is added to the set. In the visualisation of this octopus in the catalogue, the octopus is attacking a pirate ship, this can be understood as a direct reference to *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s chest*. In the movie the kraken rises up to attack ships when it is summoned by Davy Jones.¹⁰⁵ This was not the first time the kraken is mentioned, it has made an appearance in stories told about unusual sea creatures for centuries. Particularly one sea creature, described as an enormous creature with many arms, huge eyes, a gaping mouth and no body, lined with thousands of sharp hooks.¹⁰⁶ These sailor stories turned into legends among seafaring men, and are often referenced in cinematic interpretations of pirates.

¹⁰³ Lindsey Bever, “Dark-Skinned Playmobil pirate-ship doll wearing ‘slave collar’ ignites outrage.” In *The Washington Post*, (08-10-2015). [Dark-skinned Playmobil pirate-ship doll wearing ‘slave collar’ ignites outrage - The Washington Post](#)

¹⁰⁴ Bowersox, ‘Playing with Diversity’.

¹⁰⁵ HP Newquist, *Here There Be Monsters: The Legendary Kraken and the Giant Squid*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010). 51.

¹⁰⁶ Newquist. 9.



Figure 3-8: Playmobil catalogue, 2007, page 36 and 37.

Another change during this period is a shift in narrative structure. In the first phase, the main focus was on the conflict between the pirates and the Royal Navy, where the pirates were often visualised on the treasure island and the Royal Navy on the sea. In the second phase, these roles change, as the pirates are now often the ones manning the vessels, and the colonial powers are the ones situated on the islands. This is exemplified in Figure 3-8, on the right side, where the placement of the Royal Navy can be understood as a direct reference to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, where the colonial powers are the ones often presented on the land in governor towns. The pirates, in Figure 3-8, are attacking a colonial port city, housed by a Spanish colonial power, who made their first appearance in the *Pirates of the Caribbean: On stranger Tides* released in 2011.¹⁰⁷ However, before the influence of *Pirates of the Caribbean* this narrative structure is already changing as visible in the Playmobil catalogue from 1996. Figure 3-9, narrates this new perspective in which the pirates are manning the ship, and the colonial powers are guarding the tower, this is reinforced by the textual narrative too: “Gefährliche Befreiung: aus dem Piratenverlies.” It depicts the pirates as freedom fighters,

¹⁰⁷ Frances Pheasant-Kelly, ‘Pirate Politics and the Spectacle of the Ohter: Pirates of the Caribbean’, in *Fantasy Film Post 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

rather than self-serving bandits, because of their role in releasing a captured prisoner. This adds to a more complex visualisation of the pirate which begins to take shape during this period and is later reinforced through cinematic interpretations.



Figure 3-9: Playmobil catalogue, 1996, page 26 and 27.

This influence of *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, is evidently visible in Figure 20. The title of this Playmobil catalogue is: “Angriff der Geisterpiraten.” Making a direct link with the first and second film in which the ghost ship and ghost pirates make an appearance. First off, as stated in the introduction of this chapter, the figures make a direct link with the first movie in which the cursed crew of Davy Jones turns into skeletons once the moonlight strikes. Playmobil made the figures in this set glow in the dark, and when positioned in the dark the figures reveal a skeleton. Secondly, the ghostship visualises a direct reference to the flying dutchman manned by Davy Jones, in the second film.¹⁰⁸ This is visible from the torn sails, as well as the fact that the ship is sailing underwater. Additionally, the mythical creatures, such as the three headed sea creature and the crab, can also be explained through the before mentioned additions of supernatural elements, as a result of changing pirate representation in cinematic culture.

¹⁰⁸ Pheasant-Kelly.



Figure 3-10: Playmobil catalogue, 2010, page 20 and 21.

3.5 Conclusion

The visualisation of pirates in Playmobil sets from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century reflects a broader cultural shift from visualisations of historical myth to a more fantasy focussed representation of history. These shifts in historical culture can be grounded into cinematic interpretations of the pirate theme. The changes in visualisation can be analysed in three phases. The first phase, can be understood through Playmobil marketing strategy in which they wanted to emphasize the freedom and creativity of the player. The result of this is that there is no narrative presents in the first phase of visualisation in the catalogues. The second phase, can be characterised by reiteration of historical myth and influences of the movie *Treasure Island*. In this movie pirates are linked to treasure hunting and are represented as jovial drunk characters. This influenced the narratives within the Playmobil catalogues as the pirates are represented on an exotic treasure island. This emphasised their role as outlaws, which was in turn strengthened by the presence of a colonial attacker. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the emphasis moved away from representations of historical myth, and started to include more fantasy and mysterious elements, therefore creating a more visual spectacle. This change can

be understood through the renewed popularity of pirate narratives in mainstream media, specifically the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, which strongly influenced these changing narratives. Playmobil's pirate themes evolved to include new sets that drew inspiration from the films, including ghost ships, ghost pirates and mythical creatures.

In this chapter, the visualisation of pirates was analysed to provide an answer to the following sub-question: *How does Playmobil's representation of pirates in their catalogues since 1979 reflect changing cultural understandings of pirates, and what was the role of cinema in this process?* Evidently, the cultural understandings of pirates in the first phase is particularly influenced by the film *Treasure Island* in which myths about pirates are reiterated as outlaws and treasure hunters. Towards the mid-1990s there is a change in this cultural understanding as the pirates assumes a role in more elaborate narratives creating a more complex image of the pirate. In the second phase pirates are no longer only presented as outlaws opposing the colonial forces, rather they embody a more complex character as adventurous freedom fighters. Additionally, the visualisation of the pirates theme shows more mythical and fantasy element, among other different sea creatures and adventurous scavenger hunt. This can be explained through renewed visualisation of pirates in Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean*, as the influence of these movies are directly visible within the catalogues.

The next chapter will explore the shifts in historical culture related to the historical theme knights in the Playmobil catalogues. It will examine historical myths associated with knights in literature, such as the Romantic image of chivalry and knighthood, and explain significant changes in how these themes are represented.

4. Magic in the Middle Ages: Visualisation of Knights in Playmobil

In 2019, Playmobil introduced a new play theme called *Novelmore* (Figure 4-1). Novelmore is a medieval village that stands strong against its enemies thanks to its brave heroes: Gwynn the mighty warrior, Arwynn the knight of Novelmore, and the inventor Dario Da Vanci. Together, they defend their realm against the Burnham Raiders, a group of fire-loving outlaws and bandits.¹⁰⁹ The creation of this new fantasy knight world was shaped by existing historical culture and it is a construction of years of knight themed Playmobil sets that reiterate historical perceptions of knights. The characters and settings remain rooted in historical themes; for instance, the inventor Dario Da Vanci is inspired by the ideal Renaissance homo universalis: Leonardo da Vinci, who was also an inventor. Additionally, the story unfolds in a medieval village, evoking a sense of connection to the historical period the Middle Ages. While *Novelmore* shows a connection to history, it presents this history in a romanticised manner influenced by fantasy elements. The Middle Ages lend themselves well as a source of inspiration for the fantasy genre, particularly in literature. The result is a blurred line between historical reality and fantasy, leading to the inclusion of magical swords, dragons, and mythical weaponry. This chapter will address changing perceptions of knights in historical culture with an emphasize on literature, in order to understand significant changes in the visualization of the knight theme in Playmobil.



Figure 4-1: Playmobil catalogue, 2019, page 31. Playmobil, “Novelmore,” [Novelmore](https://novelmore.playmobil.com).

¹⁰⁹ Playmobil Catalogus, aug 2019 – jan 2020, p. 31.

This chapter explores the theme of knights and its changing relation to historical culture. Knights have long been a central element of Playmobil's production. The theme became particularly popular from the 2000s onwards, as seen in Figure 2-2. Since the brand's inception in 1974, a wide range of knight-related sets have been released, including castles, jousting tournaments, and different variants of knights, kings and female figures. Playmobil's narrative within this theme often features noble knights led by kings, tasked with protecting the castle, magical artifacts and women from robber knights.¹¹⁰ Within the visualisation of knights in the catalogue there are three significant changes. The first phase, similar to the other historical themes, is marked by a Playmobil's marketing strategy in which they emphasised creativity of the player. In the second phase, the focus is on traditional historical myths as reiterated in chivalric, Romantic and Gothic literature. Herein, there is the complex character of the knight is visible, as well as the opposition between the noble knight and the villainous knight. In the third phase the knight theme is blurred together with fantasy elements, severely influenced by the popular fantasy literature genre. These three phases will be analysed in this chapter, providing an answer to the question: *In what ways have representations of knights in Playmobil catalogues since 1974 mirrored broader changes in historical culture, particularly in relation to trends within fantasy literature?*

4.1 Historical Context: Romantic, Gothic and Fantasy Literature

The Middle Ages is a period that is often used as a subject in literature genres, tropes such as knighthood and chivalry remain popular in literature.¹¹¹ Many popular novel, such as *Game of Thrones* and *Lord of the Rings*, include knights and ladies who operate in medieval-like landscapes and manners. The shaping of the Middle Ages in these novels is embedded into a long process of historical culture starting in the Middle Ages.

The period between 1100 to 1450 marks the emergence of an autonomous Germanic literary culture and the start of the courtly literary tradition.¹¹² It is important to mention that these tradition build upon broader European literature tradition, and were not invented in the

¹¹⁰ Erhard, 'Wandel Und Kontinuität von Historischen Themen in Spielzeugen von LEGO Und Playmobil'.

¹¹¹ Anthony Dean Rizzuto, 'A Sense of the Past: A Brisk Overview of Chivalry and Romance', in *Raymond Chandler, Romantic Ideology, and the Cultural Politics of Chivalry* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021), 11–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88371-3_2. 21.

¹¹² Nigel Palmer, 'The High and Later Middle Ages (1100–1450)', in *The Cambridge History of German Literature*, ed. Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 40–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521434171.003>.

Germanic states. During this period, particularly in the twelfth century, Germanic narrative poems focussed on two specific literary themes: knighthood and love. In the narrative poems the idea of knight and knighthood came to embody soldiers with a noble life-style. This noble life-style is associated in literature with ideological values such as honour, loyalty and generosity in other words with a courtly way of living.¹¹³ Particularly in the poem *Erec* by Hartmann, the first Arthurian romance written in Germanic language around the 1180s, exemplifies these ideas of courtliness. This poem contains two narrative cycles. In the first narrative cycle the knight seeks out to restore his own honour, by defeating another knight and at the same time he wins himself a young noblewoman, Enite, as his bride. In Arthurian literature, like the poem *Erec*, there is a dependency on one another, as the woman, often portrayed as a ‘damsel in distress,’ good wife, or noble lady, provides a reason for the hero to perform a heroic duty.¹¹⁴ Woman thereby play an important role as there has to be someone to recognize the brave and heroic deeds of the knight, or someone to mourn the dead.¹¹⁵

During the second cycle, another medieval literary trope is emphasized as Erec has to overcome a personal crises. Erec has to overcome a personal crises in order to achieve a new understanding of knighthood this is accomplished through a popular medieval trope: the quest. In this quest Erec embarks on a journey outside of the confines of the courtly world, in which Erec has to face robbers and seduction.¹¹⁶ Medieval Arthurian literature often tells a protagonists journey towards self-knowledge, for example a better understanding of knighthood, this journey is marked through tests or quests and rewards.¹¹⁷ These quest often have to be accomplished before the protagonist receives his reward. In the poem Erec receives two rewards: in the first cycle his reward is his wife, and in the second cycle he is rewarded with a renewed understanding of knighthood. *Erec* is one of the Germanic Arthurian romances that exemplifies ideas of courtly culture and chivalric understanding of knighthood, and reiterates popular tropes such as the quest and the role of the female.¹¹⁸

After the Middle Ages these stories became less popular. The bourgeoisie started to replace the aristocracy in economic and social terms as a consequence people lost interest in

¹¹³ Palmer, 54.

¹¹⁴ Anita Kay O’Pry-Reynolds, ‘Men and Woman as Represented in Medieval Literature and Society.’, *The Saber and Scroll Journal* 2, no. 2 (2013).

¹¹⁵ O’Pry-Reynolds.

¹¹⁶ Palmer, ‘The High and Later Middle Ages (1100–1450)’. 52.

¹¹⁷ Lisa Kazianka, ‘On a Quest for Manhood: Re-Imagining Medieval Masculinities and Male Maturation in Contemporary Arthurian Adaptations for Adolescents’, 25 November 2021, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.78560>. 94.

¹¹⁸ Palmer, ‘The High and Later Middle Ages (1100–1450)’. 55.

the chivalric courtly literature. The novel *Don Quijote* by Miguel de Cervantes, written at the start of the seventeenth century, is universally credited for ending the aristocratic chivalric literature. In this novel the author ridicules the idea of knighthood as well as the damsel in distress trope.¹¹⁹ As capitalist modernity started to progress in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, new social structures replaced the feudal orders.¹²⁰ The result of these new social structures noticeable in the literary genre was a move away from chivalric and feudal ideologies. This changed during the second half of the eighteenth century as the Middle Ages staged a comeback, inspired by the new Romantic era. The Middle Ages became a site of cultural production for literature.¹²¹ Particularly one figure embodied everything the Romantics expected of humanity in a society: the knight. For the Romantics the knight is an ideal of courage, honour and selfless service who operates without fear or reproach. In this way, they connected the knight to previous values established in the High Middle Ages that had been buried under centuries of humanism and classicism.¹²² The Romantics literature was not the only genre during the time that used the Middle Ages as a cultural site for production. The gothic literature too took inspiration from this period, particular regarding the architecture. In Gothic novels the stories were often narrated in old manor type of houses or castles. These castles were often described as mysterious, gloomy and strange, additionally the castle had secret passages, rooms, trap doors and hidden staircase. Ghosts, where therefore not a strange occurrence within these stories.¹²³

One novel was particular influential in shaping the idea of the Romantic knight: *Ivanhoe* written by Walter Scott in 1819. Scott illustrated his ideal knight in his two main characters; the knight Ivanhoe and king Richard the Lionheart. He described these two characters as men who sacrificed themselves and asked for nothing in return, who are heroes in battle and approached woman with courtesy.¹²⁴ Knights like Ivanhoe, were the Romantics answers to the shortcomings of the Enlightenment. Romantics understood the Enlightenment as a period in which the individual regent was more important than the community, and in which profit was more important than service.¹²⁵ For the Romantics, medieval literature provided answers to the

¹¹⁹ Rizzuto, 'A Sense of the Past'.

¹²⁰ Rizzuto. 22.

¹²¹ Rizzuto. 23.

¹²² Peter Raedts, *De Ontdekking van de Middeleeuwen: Geschiedenis van Een Illusie* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2011).

¹²³ Jennifer G. Joseph and Padmaragam and Vemuri Lakshmi Narayana, 'GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE FOR AMBIENCE IN THE GOTHIC LITERATURE', *Journal of Industrial Pollution Control*, 22 August 2017, 1231–33.

¹²⁴ Raedts, *De Ontdekking van de Middeleeuwen*.

¹²⁵ Raedts.

shortcomings of the Enlightenment. They understood medieval society and knights, as reiterated in literature, as a place in which people stood up for each other and felt responsible for one another. In the Middle Ages, the Romantics found answers to what modern society had lost: authenticity, identity and community.¹²⁶ This is reiterated too in stories such as Robin Hood, that romanticise the knight as an outlaw hero. The outsider knight is one that is virtuous and noble and does not ask for anything in return.¹²⁷

However, Scott did not only romanticise knights or outlaws in his book. His book *Ivanhoe* also discusses knights who have an villainous character and can be understood as robber knight, especially the Templar Brian de Bois-Guilbert takes on this status. Portraying Brian as villainous helps to lift *Ivanhoe* to a heroic status. *Ivanhoe* battles Brian on three occasions, the first two encounters *Ivanhoe* is beaten, but he regains his strength and defeats Brian in his final encounter.¹²⁸ The villainous character of Brian, is often one that is reiterated through the “Black Knight.” The character of the black knight is opposite to the one of the good heroic knight as he is cowardly and treacherous. Where the good knight values honour, the black knight sought money or power.¹²⁹ These encounters and different forms of knighthood add to the complicated imagery created of knights during the Romantic period.

The Romantics were not fascinated by the Middle Ages but rather by the ideals and clichés projected onto this era. The Middle Ages assumed a position as a desired ‘homeland’ for poets and writers in which they could reflect their morals.¹³⁰ These Romantic ideas of a conceptual Middle Ages made them a good setting for the modern fantasy genre. The familiarity and romantic aura of the medieval European landscape lends itself well to use as a background setting without having to create a new fantasy world.¹³¹ Magic Swords, dragons and other creatures, are easily accepted in fantasy representation of the Middle Ages.¹³² Thereby the historical Middle Ages becomes mythologised as the fairy-tale like setting where history is blurred with mythical and fantasy ideas. These narratives are mostly adopted and demonstrated

¹²⁶ Raedts.

¹²⁷ Stephen Knight, ‘Remembering Robin Hood’, *European Journal of English Studies* 10, no. 2 (1 August 2006): 149–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570600753451>.

¹²⁸ Kenneth M. Sroka, ‘The Function of Form: *Ivanhoe* as Romance’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 19, no. 4 (1979): 645–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/450253>.

¹²⁹ Jennifer Frost and Warwick Frost, ‘Medieval Knights and Chivalry’, in *Medieval Imaginaries in Tourism, Heritage and the Media* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2021).

¹³⁰ Thomas Honegger, “‘The Past Is Another Country’ - Romanticism, Tolkien and the Middle Ages”, *Hither Shore* 7 (2010).

¹³¹ Kim Selling, ‘Fantastic Neomedievalism: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy’, in *Flashes of the Fantastic: Selected Papers from the The War of the Worlds Centennial, Nineteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, by David Ketterer (Westport: Praegar Publishers, 2004).

¹³² Selling.

through popular fantasy novels, such as Tolkiens *Lord of the Rings*.¹³³ Particularly the addition mythical creates such as dragons and dwarfs. The dragons is not new elements in fantasy literature, they have formed an integral part of folklore and legends for centuries. In the twentieth century however, many works of fiction started to feature dragons more often than before.¹³⁴ In fictional literature the usual picture of the dragon is the one taken from the hero legend, where the dragon is beaten by a knight in shining armour, this traditional narration of the dragon is also reiterated in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. The dragon Smaug is described as a dangerous dragon whose basic function in the story is as a traditional dragon, as he is pictured as the evil enemy whose destructions pertains to a happy ending.¹³⁵ Besides the novel by Tolkien, a lot of other different novels are written that fit alongside popular fantasy series such as *A Song of Ice and Fire* by R. R. Martin, which was the inspiration for the popular TV-series Game of Thrones.

In general, the Middle Ages is perfect setting for fantasy novels, because of the already existing folk tales, myths imagery and romanticised ideals. Consequently, the medieval period is therefore often portrayed as a time when life was rich. This offers a very positive image of the Middle Ages, therefore offering a form of escapism to the reader.¹³⁶ The visualisation of knights in the Playmobil catalogue can be divided into three phases; initially, a lack of narrativity, followed by a focus on historical myth and finally the introduction of elements of the fantasy genre.

4.2 The Creativity of the Player: 1974 -1993

Knights were featured in the first Playmobil catalogue distributed in 1974, as shown in Figure 4-2. This visualisation, which follows a comic strip structure, presents a distinct narrative. In the first panel, three knights and two kings are shown eating and drinking at a table. The distinction between the knights and the kings is made clear by whether they wear a helmet or a crown. In the second panel, a black knight spills a drink on one of the kings. Panel four depicts the fight that follows from this and by panel seven it is evident that the black knight who attacked the king has been defeated and lies on the ground. This catalogue reflects popular knightly tropes found in literature, particularly the villainous Black Knight, herein reiterating

¹³³ Selling.

¹³⁴ Sandra Unerman, 'Dragons in Twentieth-Century Fiction', *Folklore* 113, no. 1 (2002): 94–101.

¹³⁵ Unerman. 96

¹³⁶ Selling, 'Fantastic Neomedievalism: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy'.

myths of a treacherous figure who is sought after power. The Black Knight tropes is often visualised as an antagonist to show the good characteristics of the opposing knight or king. Similarly in this catalogue the king wins the battle, thereby adding to his strong character. Beyond this first depiction of knights in the catalogue the following years do not include narrative visualisations of knights. When knights do appear, as in the catalogue of 1975, Figure 4-3, they follow the same patterns as the early Playmobil categories, where the marketing strategy shapes the visualisation. Interestingly, although the figures from these early years use the same neutral colour palette as other themes, the black knight carries slightly different connotations due to associations with this character in literary genres.



Figure 4-2: Playmobil catalogue, 1974.



Figure 4-3: Playmobil catalogue, 1975.

4.3 The Good Knight and the Robber Knight: 1979 - 2014

The second phase is marked by reiterations of historical myth, two in particular: Gothic literature and the Romantic ideals of the knight. In the visual depiction of knights from 1986–1987, Figure 4-4, the influence of Gothic style is evident. The image in the catalogue shows a castle sets produced by Playmobil, which reflects architectural elements in Gothic literature such as dark corners and high towers. Additionally, a black knight is shown entering the castle. As previously mentioned, the figure of the black knight plays a significant role in Romantic knight literature he is often associated with villainy and treachery. While there is no explicit violence or conflict in this particular scene, this trope will be a reoccurring image in the next years. Notably, the illustrated castle in the distant background is reminiscent of a fairy tale castle, reinforcing the Romantic idealisation of the Middle Ages as an utopian and morally just society.



Figure 4-4: Playmobil catalogue, 1986-1987.

In the 1991–1992 catalogue, Figure 4-6, the same historical myths remain recognizable, but a significant shift can be observed in the portrayal of violence. In Figure 4-6 the knights attacking the castle are the black-armoured knights that are part of the same set introduced in 1986–1987. However, in the catalogue of 1991–1992 these knights now take on a more defined role within the classic good versus evil dynamic drawn from Romantic literature. The black knights are traditionally associated with a villainous character, thereby staging the knights defending the castle in a more righteous or noble light. This interpretation is supported by the inclusion of the ‘Damsel in Distress’ trope, as seen in the castle window. As previously discussed, this popular trope reinforces the image of the defending knights as heroic saviours, as they are protecting the innocent. Besides these Romantic influences, the visualization also draws from Gothic traditions. On the right side of the image, a ghostly figure is visible. The ghost is a common element in Gothic literature often used to enhance the mysterious and haunted atmosphere of the castle.



Figure 4-5: Playmobil catalogue, 1991-1992, page 14 and 15.

In the catalogue from 1993, this earlier mentioned separation between the good and the evil becomes more evident. One knight wears the colours blue and yellow, representing the good, just and honourable knight and the other knights with the yellow and purple colours, represents the intrusive black knight that already made an appearance in earlier catalogue. Visual cues help to distinguish the two knights as embodiments of good and evil. Colour symbolism plays a key role in this differentiation as darker tones like purple and black are traditionally associated with evil, while lighter colours such as yellow and blue evoke a more just presence. This contrast is reinforced through the castle in the back. The castle behind the

blue-and-yellow knight is depicted as noble and worthy of protection, due to its signs of medieval life as evident by the house in the background. In contrast, the opposing castle is marked by decay the ghostly figure on top of the castle, and the tattered flags suggest a ruined haunted castle. Additionally, the use of different coloured banners and symbols help to distinguish these two knightly orders. This catalogue shows a clear visual opposition between two different knightly orders and consequently aligns both knightly orders with a clear moral identity. In the catalogues the villains are associated with aggression, and the heroes are placed in opposition. The qualities of unrestrained violence are transferred to the villains, who as a result come to embody these negative qualities.¹³⁷ The use of the black knight as an antagonist to associate the good knight with a chivalric identity is something that draws from Romantic literature where the knight was established as a complex character that reiterates moral judgements.

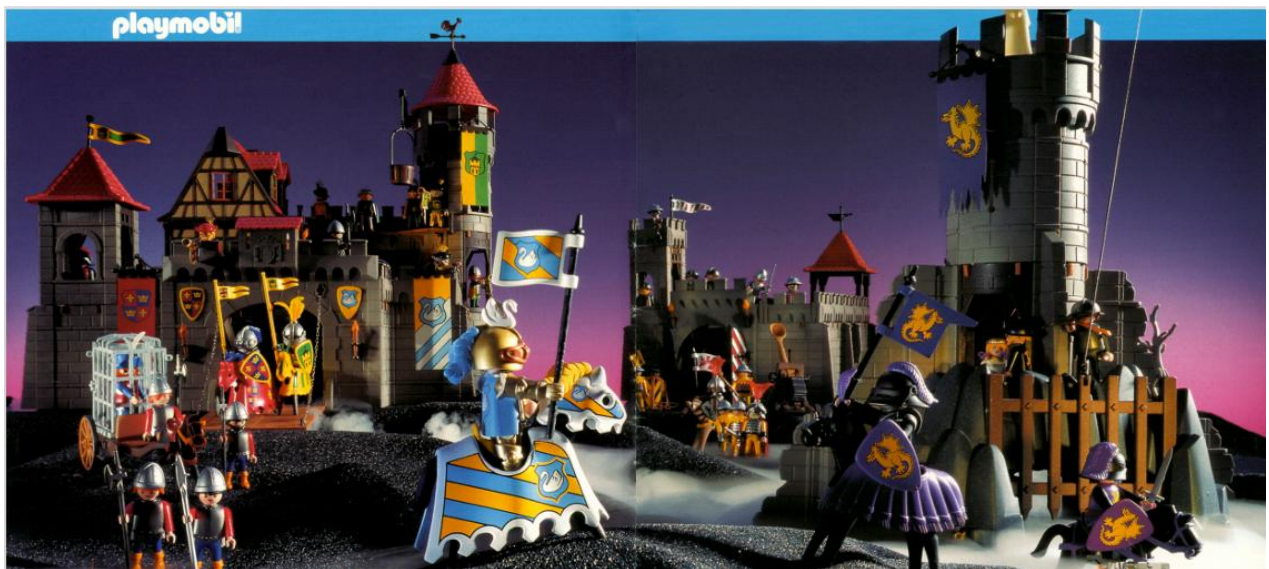


Figure 4-6: Playmobil catalogue, 1993.

This distinct separation between colour guards and the separation of good and evil are reiterated throughout the following years. In the visualisation in the catalogue of 1998, Figure 4-8, the dragon is added to the visualisation. The dragon herein is associated with the attackers namely the purple and yellow knights, this is reiterated too in the textual narrative “Das ungeheuer aus dem Felsenturm greift an!” Associating the dragon with the purple-and-yellow knights transferred the qualities of unrestrained violence to these knights, who as a result are

¹³⁷ Andrew B.R. Elliott, ‘The Power and the Glory’, in *Remaking the Middle Ages* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2011).

related to the evil qualities.¹³⁸ Another prominent trope in the catalogues is the ‘damsel in distress,’ a familiar trope used often by Playmobil. This trope highlights the nobility and honour of knights by portraying them as heroic saviours of woman. Such imagery reinforces historical myths in knight literature that opposes female vulnerability to male heroism.¹³⁹

Besides these Romantic influences, there is also an evident increase of violence not only in the visualisation but also in the castle design. The knight’s castle is equipped with numerous interactive features designed to intensify combat scenarios. For instance, there is a trap in the tower, removable wall stones and a variety of medieval weaponry, including spiked wooden barriers on the right side, crossbows in the towers and along the castle walls and a battering ram visible in the bottom left. All these elements contribute to a more dynamic violence-oriented visualisation of knight, thereby enhancing the tension between opposing sides. The increase of violent representation with toys is a trend that occurred around the changing of centuries among different toy manufacturers.¹⁴⁰ The trap in the tower can also be understood in terms of Gothic literature, where the castle often contained multiple secret passage ways and hidden traps.



Figure 4-7: Playmobil catalogue, 1998, page 34 and 35.

¹³⁸ Andrew B.R. Elliott, ‘When Knights Were Bold: Those Who Fight’, in *Remaking the Middle Ages* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2011).

¹³⁹ Shalini R Sinha, “‘Damsel in Shining Armor’ & ‘Knight in Distress’- Role Reversal of Mythical Gender Archetypes in Shakespearean Comedies.”, *Ruminations: The Andean Journal of Literature* 2 (2013).

¹⁴⁰ Erhard, ‘Wandel Und Kontinuität von Historischen Themen in Spielzeugen von LEGO Und Playmobil’.

The themes of good versus evil continues in the 2008 catalogues, in figure 4-9, with the introduction of a new knightly order: the Dragon Knights. These figures reinforce the before mentioned classic opposition between good and evil through their visual cues such as colour schemes, composition and accessories. The Dragon Knights are aligned with darkness, featuring a dragon as their symbolic creature with darker background hues. In contrast, their opponents the blue-and-yellow knights are depicted with a brighter background, signifying honour and nobility. This visualisation also reiterates another historical myth commonly found in chivalric literature: the knight's quest. The quest trope typically involves a knight embarking on a mission in pursuit of a reward. The quest highlights the knight's noble and courageous qualities. The depiction of the knight leaving the castle in Figure 4-9, together with the visual elements, aligns him with ideas of chivalric duty and knighthood, presenting him as a noble and honourable character



Figure 4-8: Playmobil catalogue, 2008. page 36 and 37.

4.4 The Middle Ages as Fantasy Realms: 2014 - 2025

From 2014 to 2016 the catalogues continue to rely on familiar visualisations of chivalric myths, while increasingly incorporating mythical and fantasy elements. This trend becomes even more

pronounced in the 2019 catalogue. In Figure 4-10, a similar narrative structure as before is visualised. This catalogue form 2014 shows two knightly orders, one that can be associated with more evil qualities and one associated with good qualities. What is new in this knight visualisation is the addition of fantasy figures, these changes can be understood through change in historical culture. As emphasized before, the middle ages lends itself well as a background for the fantasy genre, because of its easy recognizable characters and romantic image. This visualisation is particularly influenced by characters in books by Tolkien and Martin, in which fantasy characters such as trolls and dwarfs assume a large role. In Figure 4-12, the addition of these new mythical and fantasy elements inspired by the fantasy genre is even more evident. This catalogue shows the addition of new characters within the knight theme the title calls this: “Angriff der Zwerge.” The set includes a mobile *Zwergenfestung*, a *Zwergenköning* that floats on a board and a *Riesentroll mit Zwergenrucksack*, as seen in the overview of Figure 4-12. The addition of these dwarf-like and mythical characters can be understood through changes in the fantasy genre, particularly the adoption of these novels into TV-series and films changed the visualisation of the knight theme.



Figure 4-9: Playmobil catalogue, 2014, page 38 and 39.



Figure 4-10: Playmobil catalogue, 2019, page 42.

In the second half of 2019, the knight theme receives an update with the introduction of *Novelmore*, a medieval-inspired fantasy world centred on new characters: Arwynn, Dario Da Vanci, and Gwynn. In this new fantasy world, the narratives and plot structure are provided for the player. The figures all have their own role and position, as evident in Figure 4-1: Dario, is the inventor of a powerful artifact known as the Invincibus, Gwynn is the first female warrior character in the knight theme, and works together with Arwynn, the prince of Novelmore, as the protectors of Novelmore. These heroes face off against the Burnham Raiders, a group of bandits and robber knights who seek the power of the Invincibus. The *Novelmore* series marks a significant departure from the traditional historical knightly myths visualised before. While there are traces of chivalric ideas and knighthood, the overarching narrative and visual style emphasised fantasy and adventure. Notably, the female character in *Novelmore* Gwynn assumes a different role as a courageous warrior, rather than conforming to the trope of the "damsel in distress." This shift reflects changes in cultural attitudes towards gender representation. It thereby challenges the role of female characters as solely enhancing the nobility of male heroes. Playmobil actively challenges this convention by presenting one of its female characters, Gwynn, in a strong and empowering role as a warrior.



Figure 4-11: Playmobil catalogue, 2019, page 32 and 33.

The same catalogue presents a narrative visualisation of *Novelmore*, shown in Figure 4–11. Interestingly, the Romantic historical myths, seen in catalogues before, that emphasize the battle between good and evil are strongly present in this image. The Burnham Raiders are clearly associated with evil, as indicated by the fire and red glow surrounding their castle. In contrast, the *Novelmore* characters are depicted in a more chivalric and righteous notion. Besides this, the visualisation does show a strong example of the addition of magical and fantasy elements in particular set 70223, the temple of time, visible in the middle right in Figure 4-11. This set contains a magical temple guarding a piece of enchanted armour, protected by a wizard. This set is reminiscent of other myths often featured in the medieval fantasy genre, in which a magical artefact needs to be protected by the just and courageous knights. Additionally, the weaponry depicted in these newer sets also reflect the significant change due to fantasy literature, as the weapons are no longer similar to medieval arms but rather resemble fantasy inventions such as fireball launchers. The *Novelmore* theme thus represents a reinvention of the knight theme in Playmobil. One that utilises an imagined version of the medieval past influenced by the fantasy literary genre and blends this with a high fantasy and an imaginative Play world.

4.5 Conclusion

Shifts in literary representations of knights help explain significant changes in the visualisation of knights in the Playmobil catalogues as literature has assumed an influential role in shaping

the characteristics that are attributed to knights in popular culture and visualisations. The tropes established in literature, such as the quest, the Black Knight and the ‘Damsel in Distress,’ have evolved into historical myths, which are reiterated in the visual representation of the knight theme in Playmobil. Consequently, changes in visualisation can be understood in relation to developments within the literary genre, as Playmobil relates to and reflects these perceptions of history. This chapter has analysed the visual representation of knights in Playmobil, thereby addressing the following sub-question: *In what ways have representations of knights in Playmobil catalogues since 1974 mirrored broader changes in historical culture, particularly in relation to trends within fantasy literature?*

Knight visualisation within the Playmobil catalogues mirrored broader changes in historical culture, particularly in relation to the historical myths and the fantasy genre. The first phase of Playmobil's knight visualisation is shaped by a new marketing strategy that emphasizes the freedom of the player. However, this phase also reinforces some of historical myths, although they are not dominating the narrative as in later phases. The second phase articulates these historical myths, influences by Romantic and Gothic traditions, more distinctively. During this phase the figure of the knight can be understood as a more complex character, as Romantic literature uses the knight to embody moral ideals and ethical judgments. This results in portrayals of knights who not only represent traditional chivalric virtues but also engage in selfless acts that serve no direct personal gain. This idea of a knight as a noble character are reiterated in the Playmobil catalogues through popular literary myths such as the quest, the ‘Damsel in Distress,’ and the Black Knight. Gothic influences are also visible during the second phase, particularly in the design of architecture and design of the sets. The reoccurring ghosts can also be understood as a an influence of Gothic literature and becomes a staple in visualisation in the second phase of the knight theme. In the third phase, there is a noticeable departure from the Romantic and Gothic influences towards a visualisation that is heavily influenced by the fantasy genre. This is especially evident in the incorporation of magical elements and mythical creatures such as dwarfs. These changes are informed by staple works in the fantasy genre by Tolkien and Martin, who use medieval settings and themes to construct their worlds. This transition culminates in the introduction of the *Novelmore* series in 2019. The *Novelmore* play world, unlike earlier phases, is characterized by a defined narrative and characters. These changes reflect wider cultural trends in the fantasy genre.

5. Conclusion

This thesis examined Playmobil's three largest historical themes, the Wild West, pirates, and knights, to understand how toys reciprocate and relate historical narratives that are embedded into historical culture. For children, toys are one of their early encounters with history outside of established curricula, therefore it is important to understand what kind of narratives these toys as well as their visualisation in the Playmobil Catalogues reiterate. Additionally, as these toys are embedded into historical culture, they can provide information about perceptions and changing perceptions of history within a cultural context. Overall the three historical themes that were analysed were all subject to changes in historical culture.

First off, the historical theme the Wild West was analysed to understand changes in historical culture related to postcolonial critique. Three phases were identified that showed a significant shift in visualisation as a result of postcolonial critique. The first phase, from 1974 to 1978, most prominently reiterated the marketing strategy adopted by Playmobil. Playmobil profiles itself as a company that highlights the creative freedom of the player, in the catalogue they visualise this through interactivity between different themes, and a lack of narrativity within the actual visual. Besides, this marketing strategy the overall design of the set still adheres to certain visual aspects evident in the historical culture. The design of the Indians with their feathered bonnets, and decorating handcuffs, can be understood in terms of a stereotypical Indian representation often reiterated in historical culture. During the second phase, from 1978 to 1996 these stereotypical representations of Indians increases as they are often depicted in the catalogues as savages. This is partly due to their accessories, but also their position within the narrative. The Indians are often represented as antagonists in a story of the American Cavalry, in which the Indians are positioned as the attackers and the American Cavalry as the protectors of the postal carriage and their fort. This presentation reiterates myths rooted in colonial thinking such as Manifest Destiny and the Frontier myth. These visualisations again change during the third phase, from 1996 to 2025. During the third phase the Indians are represented as a cultural entity. Herein, there is a larger focus on the different roles and hierarchy within the Indian culture. Although, they are represented as a cultural entity their narratives are still embedded within stereotypical and colonialist visualisation. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the visualisation of the Indians and American cavalry is rarely present in the catalogues. This can be explained through increase of postcolonial critique regarding the visualisation of the Native American culture. During the end of the twentieth century

postcolonial critique started to rise with questions of ownership and authority of colonised society. Questions such as: who is allowed to interpret, profit or represent Native American culture? So, during the end of this phase, visualisation of Indians ceased altogether, reflecting growing concerns about the legitimacy of companies like Playmobil in representing and profiting from Native American culture.

In the third chapter the historical theme pirates is addressed. This historical theme can be divided up into three periods of changing representation related to historical culture. The first phase of visualisation is marked by Playmobil marketing strategy, similarly to the other themes. During the first years, Playmobil wanted to profile themselves as a company that allowed the player to have full creative freedom, this resulted in neutral colours of the toys and the lack of a narrative in the visualisation of the theme. This changed towards the Second phase where there is a distinctive reoccurring narrative present. In this narrative the pirates are presented as lawless outlaws, who oppose the Royal Navy as the authoritative figure. Besides this recurring narrative this phase is characterised by the reiteration of historical myths, these are tropes often visualised in cinematic visualisations of pirates such as *Treasure Island*. The main historical myths that are evident in this phase, are treasure islands, treasure hunting and the visualisation of the captain as a 'great man.' During the 1990s the visualisation of the pirate theme starts to shift. Although, popular historical myths are still reiterated, fantasy and mythical elements are added to the visualisations of pirates in the catalogues. Traditional historical pirate myths such as the treasure island, receive mythical upgrades. These changes can be related to cinematic influence, in particular the popular Disney movies: *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. The influence of these movies are evident in the supernatural and fantasy elements that are added. These can be retraced to certain tropes in the movie. Additionally, there is a change in the narrative structure. The Royal Navy is no longer visualised on the sea, rather they are visualised on the main land. This shift in narrative can also be understood in relation to the movies, where the colonial forces are often represented on the main lands.

The fourth and final chapter discussed the changing visualisation of the historical theme knights. The representation of knights is deeply shaped by historical myth reiterated in different literary genres. The representation can be divided up into three distinct phases. The first phase, similarly to the other themes lacks a narrative presentation due to the marketing strategy of Playmobil. Beside the lack of a narrative, the phase does contain some historical myths that will be emphasised in the coming phases. Particularly the second phase, reiterates historical myths reinforced in Romantic and Gothic literature. This phase is marked by a distinct narrative

that depicts an opposition between a good knight and an evil knight. This is influenced by Romantic literary tropes, that often used the Black Knight trope to enhance the characteristics of the good knight. The Romantic period understood the good knight as an embodiment of their ideas of a moral and just person. The second phase often visualises this dichotomy, where the Black Knight is associated with villainous characteristics and the good knight with noble ones. Other literary tropes such as, the quest and the 'Damsel in Distress' also add to the visualisation of the good knight as a noble character. A significant change in the third phase is the addition of Fantasy and magical elements, influenced by changed in the Fantasy literature. Particular influential novels by Tolkien and Martin influenced this process. While the knight theme still reiterates certain historical myths, they now do so with the use of fantasy and magical elements and inventions. This shift culminates in the launch of *Novelmore* in 2019, where the medieval setting serves as an aesthetic backdrop. These transitions reflects broader cultural changes, in the literary genre.

The empirical analysis of the three chapters shows that toys can be understood as material cultural artefact, that reiterate societal perceptions about certain historical events, periods, or personas. The way society engages with and interprets history is embedded in historical culture. This thesis examined three movements or industries that are shaped by, and in turn shape, historical culture in order to understand their influence on Playmobil's historical toy themes. The selected movements or industries are postcolonial critique, cinematic interpretations, and literary genres, who respectively influenced the representation of the Wild West, pirates, and knights. The three empirical chapter that build upon these perceptions help to answer the following research question: *How has the visual representation of the Wild West, pirates, and knights in Playmobil catalogues changed since 1974, and to what extent are these changes indicative of changes in broader historical culture?*

As discussed above, these themes were all subjected to changes in historical culture, and can be understood as indicative measures of these changes. For all three themes, the first phase was severely influenced by Playmobil's marketing strategy. Playmobil wants to profile itself as a company where the player has full creativity in playing. The result of that the figures are manufactured in neutral colours and that accessories provided in the set can be used interchangeably with different themes. Besides the lack of narrativity in the visualisation of the catalogue, some accessories provided particularly for the theme did reiterate historical myths formed by historical culture. Take for example, the feathered bonnets for the Indians, the tri-cornered hats for the pirates and the black coloured knights. Although these accessories did

reiterate historical myths, they are all removable and when removed left the player with a neutral coloured figure that could assume a different role thereby providing the player with freedom and creativity in their play.

In the second phase all the themes adhere to similar narrative structures, that visualise a distinct opposition between two groups. In particular the Wild West and the pirate theme reiterate a conflict narrative. In the Western theme, this conflict is represented between the Indians and the American cavalry, while in the pirate theme, it unfolds between the British Navy and the pirates. Both themes draw from a historical period marked by the presence of colonial powers, making the use of oppositional narratives a logical narrative. Additionally colonial powers are typically depicted as strong, authoritative forces, and there for their opponents are often defined in relation to that authority. In the case of the Western theme, the role of the Indians is as antagonists, reinforcing colonial narratives such as Manifest Destiny and the myth of the Frontier. This can be understood in relation to historical culture, as during this period the authoritative colonial narrative remained largely intact and was frequently reinforced through popular depictions of the Wild West. In these colonial narratives Indians are understood as savages and the American cavalry is depicted in light of Manifest Destiny and as the Frontiersman. In contrast, the pirate theme offers a different dynamic while maintaining a similar narrative structure. Pirates are often portrayed in popular historical culture as rebellious, adventurous outlaws so their opposition to the Royal Navy reflects a romanticised desire to resist and overcome authoritarian power. It thereby reiterates historical myths that understand the pirate as an outlawed and free character. The historical culture from which these myths emerge is heavily influenced by cinematic interpretations, particularly the film *Treasure Island*. The knight theme also adheres to a similar narrative structure during the second phase in which there is an opposition between two groups. However, the knight theme differs in that the central opposition does not stem from a colonial time period. As a result, the characters are not defined in relation to colonial authoritative power structures. Instead, this opposition can be understood in relation to historical myths created in literature and reinforced through historical culture. Particularly the literary trope of the Black Knight, who functions as a villainous and treacherous character to highlight the nobility and virtue of the good knight.

In the third phase there are similarity between the historical theme pirates and knights, as both themes are marked by the addition of fantasy and mythological elements severely influenced by popular culture. In the pirate theme this shift reiterates shift in historical culture caused by the enormous popularity of Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Particularly the

changing position in the catalogue of the colonial forces, and the addition of fantasy and magical elements that draw directly from the films indicate the influence. For the knight theme, changes in visual representation in the third phase can be explained through developments within the fantasy genre. The fantasy genre has had a particularly strong influence on the historical culture surrounding the Middle Ages. This is because it often uses the medieval period as a recognizable and romanticized setting into which magical and fantastical elements can be integrated. These shifts within fantasy literature significantly impacted how knights are portrayed within historical culture, and in turn the Playmobil catalogues. During this phase, the knight theme became increasingly infused with mythical and fantasy elements, including magical swords and figures resembling dwarves and other mythical creatures. These elements can be understood in relation to the Fantasy genre, as these often assume a prominent role in Fantasy novels. Although the pirate and knight themes rose in popularity during this period, the Western theme began to fade. From the 2000s onwards, it was largely absent from Playmobil catalogues, with only rare appearances. This decline can be understood in relation to the rise of postcolonial critique, which significantly influenced the historical culture surrounding the Western theme. During this time, increasing attention was given to issues of cultural ownership and representation. As a result, the Indians in the catalogues were visualised more as distinct cultural entities instead of antagonists figures in the colonial narrative. Toward the end of this phase, the visualisation of Indians ceased altogether, reflecting an increased awareness and concern over the legitimacy of companies like Playmobil in representing and profiting from Indigenous cultures.

Visual historical culture has proven effective in supporting and understanding changes in visualisation and representation of history in the Playmobil catalogues. Historical culture offers a framework through which to deconstruct the current myths, narratives and perceptions about history. This is necessary as the history that shapes the design in Playmobil sets and the visualisation in their catalogues is part of a marketable product. As De Groot has argued, history herein is commodified and adopted to fit a commercial product.¹⁴¹ This means that, the adoption of historical themes in Playmobil toy sets is both shaped by creating a profit and creating a product the consumer wants to engage with to seek enjoyment. Therefore, studying the historical accuracy of events depicted in these toys is not a particularly useful method, as Playmobil does not aim to produce historically accurate representations. In addition to adopting a historical cultural framework, visual analysis was also used as a supplementary method,

¹⁴¹ Groot, *Consuming History*.

thereby adopting a visual historical framework. Visual analysis proved particularly valuable in the study of historical culture, as it enabled the identification of signs and semiotic meanings embedded within the visuals in the catalogues. By examining the relationships between these signs, it was possible to uncover underlying historical myths, which could then be contextualised within broader ideas of historical culture.

The visual historical framework helped to understand and analyse the representation and visualisation of history in Playmobil catalogues. Consequently, this analysis has shown that Playmobil's relation to history is highly adaptable. The adaptability of history in toys conforms to findings of prior studies by scholars such as Barthes, Rosner, and Katie who have demonstrated that toys can be interpreted as reflections of society, thereby mirroring current social values and historical receptions. Understanding these changes in historical culture is particularly significant given the influential role of toy companies like Playmobil. For many children, toys provide some of their earliest encounters with history outside formal education. Understanding how and why Playmobil reproduces certain narrative structures is therefore essential, as it helps to understand how and why these historical narratives are introduced to young audiences.

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7. Appendix I: Analysis Sheet

Category	Subcategory	Analytical Column
0. Metadata	Year	19XX
	Catalog Source (if needed)	(e.g., "Main Catalog," "Special Edition")
I. Theme Overview	Presence/Prominence	Rate the theme's presence: (Absent / Minor / Moderate / Major / Dominant).
	Key Sets (2-3 Max)	Select 2-3 <i>most representative or significant</i> sets. Justify choices (e.g., new introductions, sets exemplifying a trend).
II. Visual Analysis	Denotation (Key Elements)	For selected sets, describe <i>key</i> figures, structures, and accessories. Prioritize elements relevant to historical accuracy, stereotypes, and genre conventions.
	Visual Style	Describe the <i>visual style</i> : Realistic? Stylized? Cartoonish? How is color used? Composition? Poses?
III. Textual Analysis	Key Quotes/Captions	Record <i>verbatim</i> any significant text. Include page numbers.
	Textual Tone/Style	Describe the tone and style of the text. Analyze how the text reinforces or contradicts the visual presentation.
	Narrative Elements	Does the text introduce narratives? Analyze how the text might present a specific narrative.
IV. Material Analysis	Affordances of Play	How might the design of the figures, structures, and accessories <i>encourage or constrain</i> certain types of play? Consider articulation, modularity, and the overall "play system."
	Materiality & Construction	Briefly describe the <i>material</i> (type of plastic, feel) and <i>construction</i> (how parts fit together, durability) of the key elements. How do these material qualities contribute to the play experience?
V. Interpretation	Connotation (Key Meanings)	What are the main cultural, historical, and social meanings?
	Dominant Myths	Which key myths are most prominent? What narratives are <i>missing</i> or downplayed?
VI. Year-Over-Year Comparison	Key Changes & Trends	Summarize the <i>most significant</i> changes and trends in the theme compared to the previous year, <i>drawing from all previous sections</i> .