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**Book review: David Gauntlett, *Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences*. London: Routledge, 2007. 208 pp. ISBN: 9780415396592, \$55.95 (pbk)**

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David Gauntlett, *Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences*. London: Routledge, 2007. 208 pp. ISBN: 9780415396592, \$35.95 (pbk)

This is a book about 'the apparently rather odd process of asking people to build metaphors in Lego' (p. 124). To continue with David Gauntlett's own description of his work, it is a book intended to explore what identity means to people themselves, by applying

a visual and creative research method which encourages participants to spend time reflecting on their identity, through asking them to build a model of it in Lego. This challenge required the hands and mind to be working together in unison, playing with different pieces until conscious or previously-not-quite-conscious ideas emerged in the formations of Lego shapes, figures and animals. (p. 195)

The book is a pleasure to read. First of all it oozes rhetorical talent, as the author accomplishes a straightforwardly chatty style, humorous and self-ironic, and rich in succinct scholarly condensation. This is true of the many foundation-laying chapters in which Gauntlett succeeds in covering with impressively broad-ranging scholarship, complex theories about art and creativity, different epistemological orientations within the philosophy of science, sociological approaches to social structure and human agency, the neuroscientific and psychological workings of consciousness, as well as more descriptive and analytical chapters that map the methodological origins of the use of visual materials in sociological fieldwork.

The chapters that provide the theoretical prerequisites are immensely useful, and I can recommend them as ideal sources of presentational shortcuts for colleagues planning the 'snapshot of theorist X' for their undergraduate classes. Sometimes, however, the presentations and discussions take on a life of their own, somewhat excessive in relation to the specific purpose they are meant to serve as stepping stones for legitimating the theoretical and methodological choices on which the Lego identities study is based. Some specific points are also worth discussing, such as Gauntlett's sympathetic effort to rehabilitate Popper's falsifiability prescription as a sound way to scientific progress, which has a peculiar ring to it, since Popper insists on the (quantitative) testability of any theoretical truth, while Gauntlett's favourite epistemological procedure turns out to be 'abduction' (rather than induction or deduction), which defies such testability.

I wholeheartedly support the methodological entrepreneurship that has produced this unusual empirical study of identities. We do need to push our conventional methodological repertoires to the limit and beyond, to be able to increase the explanatory power of our analyses, by constantly adding new tools to our toolbox for observation and interpretation of social practices and meanings. In this and previous studies in which he has explored the potential of getting people not to just make sense of



existing visual materials, but getting them to produce their own photos, videos and (here) Lego models as a means to inspire them to reflect on and communicate their sense-making processes, Gauntlett has contributed boldly and significantly to such methodological progress.

While reading this book, I have found myself to be a fundamentally supportive companion of expedition leader David Gauntlett on his methodological journey, but having arrived at its destination I have not become a disciple, and my scepticism has been corroborated by many observations made along the way. I therefore accept his invitation, in the true spirit of scientific dialogue, to feel 'free to disagree' (p. 182) with some of his key arguments. The reason why I can do so, obviously, is that Gauntlett lays out his analytical process meticulously and transparently, so that in addition to the strengths, the shortcomings also become visible.

First, throughout the book Gauntlett's promotion of visual methodologies takes off from an unnecessary vilification of the potential of verbal methods. While accepting that visual and verbal methods can bring about different insights, I do not accept that verbal methods are inferior. At one point Gauntlett invites us to 'imagine if we were to ask people to generate a verbal account of identity' (p. 183) and proceeds to argue that this would only lead to superficial insights. However, his imaginary study, in which an imaginary researcher would ask informants crude questions, is close to parody, and far from, say, a possible Riceour-inspired narrative approach (which Gauntlett champions for his visual approach), which would stimulate informants to reflect verbally on their experiences.

Second, Gauntlett's deprecating view of the knowledge-generating potential of language is contradictory, since he turns out to rely heavily on the verbalized accounts of his participants: his approach considers the visual and verbal sense-making processes to belong to one unified package, so language is 'needed to *explain* the visuals' (p. 183). If metaphors, generically, are 'valuable' because they can serve to 'capture a set of feelings and ideas within the simple envelope of a particular image' (184), how come a verbal metaphor should be a poorer vehicle than a visual one? Would poets and novelists agree?

Third, when it comes to the analysis of the massive verbalized accounts produced by the participants about their Lego identity models, apparently Gauntlett meets the analytical challenge empty-handed. The participants' oral and written narratives about their models are consistently reported, not interpreted, taken at face value as unproblematic accounts of their experienced identities, not analysed as instances of verbal identity performances.

This may be due to Gauntlett's unabashed view that discourse analytical tools are useless (p. 102) – early on in his academic career he determined that

'discourse analysis' is a relatively meaningless phrase ... I could not see what it meant to do discourse analysis, or what benefits one could confidently say that



'discourse analysis' would bring ... In the intervening years I have concluded that this hunch was correct. (p. 102)

Fair enough, obviously – I feel the same way about other analytical tools that are valued highly by others, but then I would expect a non-adherent of discourse analysis at least to resort to another approach to the analysis of verbalized accounts, rather than none at all, for wrenching open the manifest and latent meanings encoded by the participants.

Finally, in addition to these fundamental epistemological and methodological issues, there are many aspects of the detailed procedures of the Lego model-building and reflection process that one might want to discuss in order to clarify and problematize some of the choices made. For example, when being trained briefly to carry out the identity-building with Lego units, the participants were assured that they did not 'have to reveal the most private aspects of yourself; you don't have to bare your soul; rather, you are provided with an opportunity to say "This is how I would like you to be introduced to me"' (p. 138). Does this instruction not turn the whole exercise into a rather benevolent presentation of self, without the face-loss danger that would appear to follow from a genuine presentation of one's identity? A kind of all Dr Jekyll, no Mr Hyde.

It is also tempting to compare the finite expressive possibilities of the Lego units available to each participant with the infinite expressive possibilities of their language resources, and to ask if there may have been a constrained and contrived expression of identities due to the limited number of 'signs' in the Lego box? For example, a Duplo elephant had to represent, for different participants, identity elements as diverse as 'ambition, strength, travel, overcoming fears, friends, supporting others and wisdom' (p. 155).

Along the same lines, a male participant's model showed

a female figure standing on several bricks, holding a snake, covered by a net, representing the participant's ex-wife, a woman whom he 'put on a pedestal' (the bricks) but was ultimately 'poison' in his life (the snake), but is now safely in the past (the net). (p. 153)

My response to this metaphorical Lego model would be that rather than representing imaginative, breakthrough insights about his identity, not expressible by verbal means, these verbalized visual Lego metaphors seem like a contrived representation resulting from the limited expressive possibilities of the small, finite set of Lego components.

In spite of these methodologically questionable aspects, Gauntlett does succeed in harvesting from his 'creative explorations' some interesting insights about people's subjectively experienced identities, which highlight the interdependence of the public and private aspects of someone's self, the remarkable degree of self-reflection in people's narratives about identity, and not least the refutation of received wisdom about fragmented



postmodern selves: the participants have a clear “‘will to coherence” – the desire to assemble a solid and unified view of self-identity’ (p. 195).

Finally, a warning to those who might pick this book up for the subtitle’s promise to present insights about ‘audiences’: it does not. The guidelines given to the participants at the start of the Lego exercise, and indeed the whole fieldwork set-up, clearly marginalized the role of the media for the participants. However, as Gauntlett observes hypothetically, their narratives about identity ‘will almost *inevitably* have been affected by the stories and values which we encounter so regularly in popular media’ (p. 195). However, we will have to look to further research to set the spotlight on the nexus between mediated and personal narratives about identity.

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John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*. London: Sage, 2007. 192 pp. ISBN: 9781412912037, £60 (hbk)

The critique of speed is a thriving vein of critical thought situated at the intersection of media studies, geography, technology studies, sociology and political theory. John Tomlinson’s *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* invokes the conceptual framework of ‘immediacy’ onto a scene already replete with neologisms – from the ‘hypermodern’ (John Armitage, Gilles Lipovetsky) and the ‘dromocratic’ (Paul Virilio) to the ‘chronoscopic’ (Robert Hassan). But John Tomlinson’s introduction of ‘immediacy’ is no such aphoristic neologism. Instead, Tomlinson puts forth a compelling theoretical intervention for social and cultural theory situated at the crossroads of technology and consumer society. Gesturing towards a radical pluralist approach to democracy, Tomlinson carefully explores new cultural and political possibilities inexorable to the cultural transition from speed to immediacy.

Through a conventional sociological perspective and quasi-phenomenologist approach, Tomlinson unpacks what he calls ‘the coming of immediacy’ in seven chapters which unfold systematically in a captivating narrative. It is important to note that Tomlinson is not providing a history of speed-up, wherein immediacy is now the next technological by-product of the most recent transformative machine, such as the internet. Instead, he is relaying dominant stories of speed by locating how ‘speed is powerfully inscribed’ in the ‘written and unwritten institutional narratives that have given form, meaning, and value to the modern experience’ (pp. 8–9). In order to do this, he searches within the texts of systemic social theorists, references literature and film, and gathers casual evidence from everyday observations.