

## **Playspaces of Anthropological Materialist Pedagogy: Film, Radio, Toys**

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Much of Walter Benjamin's work is pedagogical, in the sense that he judges things—artworks, trivia, experiences—in relation to their capacity to provide an occasion for learning, for expanding consciousness of the skills and attitudes required in contemporary everyday life. Things and situations are measured also, frequently, in relation to how much they begin to take control of blind processes, in order to steer them. Such a presentation of things or situations from the perspective of possible learning—considering how they might enable the development of new habits or the shattering of old ones—relies on the emergence of a *Spielraum*, a play space, a room for manoeuvre or wiggle room.<sup>1</sup> This space for play joins Benjamin's other spatialized concepts, such as *Leibraum* and *Bildraum*, body space and image space, which interpenetrate in the modern age, as, for example, in cinema, where an audience encounters the dynamic film image, and the collective body of the spectators is innervated by the forces of the “second technology.”<sup>2</sup> The *Spielraum* gives scope for the play of imagination. It develops the capacity for flexible thought in adults or the slippery facility with language in children, as much as it is an imagined space in reality, a potential for habitation and habituation contained in the technical form of film or radio or in children's affinity for the speculative space of fairy tales, to name just a few examples.

In his essay “Experience and Poverty,” from 1933, Benjamin proposes for those who have lost faith in modern institutions an educative mode drawn from the folk tale and fairy tale. He reflects on an older notion of wisdom, now unavailable to contemporary generations who have been ravaged and reformed—or deformed—by industrialization and by the First World War and its aftermath. Benjamin begins with a folk tale, instancing an unspecified time

before the war when wisdom was passed down through the generations from mouth to ear. The fable relates how a father educated his sons in the merits of hard work by tricking them into believing that there was buried treasure in the vineyard next to their house. The turning of soil in the futile search for gold yields a tangible treasure: a magnificent crop of fruit. Once, observes Benjamin, there was a world in which, in this way or another, the old handed on their wisdom to the young. Their wisdom was born of experience and was delivered to the coming generation in the form of practical lessons adapted from what had been learned in a lifetime of practicing. Benjamin goes on to report how the coming of world war disturbed this process of transmission by interrupting the modes of experience of the generations who came immediately before and after the war. It is as if the good and bountiful soil of the fable had become the oppressive mud of the trenches, which will bear no fruit but only moulder as a graveyard. “Where do you hear words from the dying that last and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring?” asks Benjamin. Where is the golden crop that will outlast the day of its appearance? Nowhere, he replies. There is only discontinuity, soulless training, and machinery. This is the utter opposite of a play space. It is a moribund space, embracing the demise of experience and of language. It is a space where the commonplaces of contemporary being—the strategic nature of life, the stability of the economy, the continuities of physical well-being, the moral basis of existence—ring hollow in the face of what has occurred in war.

For never has experience been contradicted so thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. (Benjamin 1999b: 732)

War ruined expectations. The conviction that life—like war—might be strategically planned is undermined in the experience of a war of position in which soldiers are bogged down in the

mud or buried in trenches, their space for manoeuvre severely truncated. Benjamin concludes his adumbration of contemporary impoverished experience in this way:

A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn street-cars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin 1999b: 732)

The only link with the period before the war is the vulnerable human body standing unprotected under the clouds. Even after the ceasefire, the fighter stands forsaken and defenseless in a landscape that does not stop being a combat zone. A new body is fashioned out of the dramatic exchanges between technology and nature; something is built up by technology, even as it destroys. In “To the Planetarium,” the concluding section of *One-Way Street*, from the mid-1920s, Benjamin writes of a cosmic shudder played out in the mad ecstasies of war: “In the nights of annihilation of the last war, the frame of mankind was shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic” (Benjamin 1996: 487). A new body, a new physis and neurology that is nonetheless reminiscent of physiologies long past, is cast into the open field of forces that is the world, and to it attaches the remaining shreds of human hope. Benjamin’s mature commitment is to an “anthropological materialism,” as Adorno characterized it in condemning it—an awareness of the ongoing recomposition of nature, and specifically of the human body, which the human sensorium experiences through technological development.<sup>3</sup> This experience is intense and is felt on the body. It means a materialism that, as Adorno defined it, takes its measure of concretion from the human body itself. Anthropological materialism in Benjamin indicates a *subjectification* of materialism, in case it needs it. In his account, a new human is nascent in the epoch of industrial capitalism, one who communicates in *different* ways with, in, and through the world, and is in a process of learning how to negotiate the world under new conditions of experience and operativity.

This learning to negotiate is what requires play, or, more precisely, the generation of possibilities of learning through play. This body is not a static essence, as Adorno's attack might imply, but rather is mediating and mediated, shape-shifting and time-shifting, is recomposed endlessly through apparatuses and through images. It is, at times, the body of *rauschhafte*—intoxicated—experience, subjected to war, industrial clamour, revolution, and caught in the glow of fleeting image worlds. What does it mean to learn under these conditions?

“To The Planetarium” indicates how much Benjamin's post-war concern is pedagogical. He opens with the question of teaching, first outlining what Antiquity has to teach modernity: cosmic experience must exist and it must be ecstatic and communal. This ecstatic, communal relationship to the universe has been thwarted in rationalist society, reduced and banalized to the experience of individual poets serenading moonlit nights, but it cannot be fully banished. Indeed, it returns dramatically in distorted form in the bloodbaths of war. Technology is its catalyst, but technology is entwined with capital and its modes and relations of production. Capital diverts technology's efforts to set atremble the relations between humanity and nature into a lust for profit, sacrificing humans in the process of scrambling for territory. Capital turns technology against nature, conquering countries, militarizing landscapes, slaughtering people. This leads Benjamin to another reference to pedagogy:

The mastery of nature, so the imperialists teach, is the purpose of all technology.

But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education above all the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery, if we are to use this term, of that relationship and not of the children? And likewise technology is not the mastery of nature but of the relation between nature and

man. (Benjamin 1996: 486)

Education is a matter of regulating relationships. Just as the aim of technology, in its engagements with humans, is to overcome oppression, so too education would calibrate a communal endeavor, such that young and old learn from one another. The quest for new habits is crucial to this regulation of relations between humans, nature and technology. Formed habits, ones appropriate for life under renewed conditions, betoken the internalization of the newly ordered relationships.

But new and salutary habits cannot be simply dictated from above. In a review entitled “Colonial Pedagogy,” from 1930, Benjamin mocks the “fun-loving reformism” of Alois Jalkotzy and his book on fairy tales in the present day, *Märchen und Gegenwart. Das deutsche Volksmärchen und unserer Zeit* (1930), which advocated an updating of fairy tales for “contemporary sensibilities” so as to cleanse them of bloodshed and violence. These pedagogues, Benjamin complains, have learned nothing about their object of study, and cannot imagine learning from them. They believe themselves to be modern in the sense of progressive. In treating children as tender sprouts in a world apparently beyond violence and hierarchy, they act as colonizers of the child’s thoughts and desires. They cannot conceive, as Benjamin can in “Old Toys,” that children have a penchant for the “grotesque, cruel and grim,” the “despotic and dehumanized.”<sup>4</sup>

The type of child psychology in which the author is well versed is the exact counterpart to that famous “psychology of primitive peoples”—primitive peoples as heaven-sent consumers of European inferior goods. It exposes itself at every turn: “*The fairy tale allows the child to equate itself with the hero.* This need for identification corresponds to that infantile weakness which it experiences in relation to the adult world.” To appeal to Freud’s fantastic interpretation of infantile superiority (in his study of narcissism), or even to experience, which

confirms the opposite, would be to take too much trouble with a text in which superficiality is proclaimed with a fanaticism which, under the banner of the contemporary, unleashes a holy war against everything that does not correspond to the “present-day sensibility” and which sets children (like certain African tribes) in the first line of battle. (Benjamin 1972: 273 [“Kolonialpädagogik”])

The war goes on. The cultural imperialists are in charge of pedagogy. They and their children—along with their colonial subjects—learn nothing but how to suffer more distractedly, while accommodating to the commodity. In the plasticity of the *Spielraum*, by contrast, they learn to play and play to learn.

### Film

Benjamin develops the notion of *Spielraum* in relation to a defense of Soviet film in 1927.<sup>5</sup> In film, he argues, a new realm of consciousness comes into being, and this emergent consciousness is intimately bound up with an exploration of milieu and of social class. At least in Russia, the proletariat is the hero of film’s spaces, which are collective spaces for collective figures—a fact that *Battleship Potemkin* makes “clear for the first time.”

In film Benjamin sought models of educational engagement, and these presented themselves as collectivist in some form as well as repetitive or reproducible. It is technological media that perhaps most cogently offer opportunities for collective practice and learning. Particularly apt are the media of photography and film, which are uniquely capable of opening up routes through the dream and the “optical unconscious.” Cultural technologies offer themselves for the project of “profane illumination” and function to acquaint audiences with the intricacies of the new world they daily experience. Habit itself is made visible and hence conscious, for everything, even the most familiar, may be revealed anew by

technological application—that is to say “shattered” and recomposed at one and the same time. In his essay “Little History of Photography,” from 1931, Benjamin notes:

Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. (1999b: 510)

The secret it reveals involves the “unexpected stations” that are latent in a house or a room or a street. These are notional spaces of play, new sites for new engagements between people, nature and technology (1999b: 17).

Film makes of viewers new, or renewed, people—people who are no longer simply natives but have become explorers in the ruined shards of their own everyday. The world is splintered in film, in order then to be recomposed as an image world:

The cinema then exploded this entire prison-world with the dynamite of its fractions of a second, so that now we can take extended journeys of adventure between their widely scattered ruins. (17)

A familiar space is turned into a defamiliarized—and, as it were, post-war—zone of adventure. The image of material as represented in new mass technologies of reproduction presents a seeing beyond seeing. It is animated, given a semblance of life by the machine—and yet it is a life that seems to have always been held in its material propensities, waiting to find the right mediator, the release into image. Film, photography, the close-up, the kinetic, all this constitutes the matter of the world as synthesized anew in the image. Such seeing is not just seeing. It is insight. It is seeing into. Or it is not seeing at all, in traditional human terms. It is supplemented seeing—supplemented by the “optical unconscious” in machinery that sees for the viewer, and that thereby exceeds the banality of intention. Benjamin’s phrase “optical

unconscious” suggests that film itself, the cinematic strip, the processes of montage, could outstrip the intentions of the filmmaker. The filmic unconscious is comprised of chance details, moments when the images and activity recorded perform in unanticipated ways or are perceived in ways unattainable by the unassisted eye. Externalized in film, this cinematic unconscious becomes conscious and, as such, accessible to analysis. It turns pedagogical.

In “News about Flowers,” a 1928 review of Karl Blossfeldt’s photobook *Urformen der Kunst* (Primal Forms of Art), Benjamin tells how “a geyser of new image-worlds hisses up at points in our existence where we would least have thought them possible” (1999b: 156). Here, in a magnification of natural forms, something unseen till now comes to light in that which is most familiar, in what we call nature. Indeed, in the vision of the new within the old, the faculty of seeing itself is recreated. The camera routes vision through the machine and so disconnects humans from their habitual modes of seeing. In Blossfeldt’s images, a “second nature” comes into view. Visible in these plates are a bishop’s crozier represented in an ostrich fern, while the oldest forms of columns bob up in horsetail, and totem poles appear in the shoots of the horse chestnut and maple, magnified tenfold, as the shoot of a wolf’s bane unfurls like the body of a highly gifted female dancer. Benjamin observes how Blossfeldt’s photography permits exploration in an estranged landscape: “We, the observers, wander amid these giant plants like Lilliputians” (157). As humans are set loose to wander in this new territory, amid a nature that is both the same and different, they become, in effect, anthropologists of themselves. They come to know themselves and their present world better—or indeed solely—through its mediation.

The natural bonds of the world are shattered or contorted in the technological image, allowing an analysis of parts to open the way to a reconfiguration of the whole. Benjamin observes, in naming an early draft of one section of his Work of Art essay “Mickey Mouse,” that in cartoons, especially, adventurous travelers are offered a multitude of trips through



widely strewn “ruins.” Space is expanded and shrunk by montage, while time is stretched and contracted by time loops. Benjamin presents Disney's characters as utopian figures, soulmates of the utopian socialist writer Charles Fourier, and descendants of a lineage that includes the illustrator Grandville's flora and fauna satires on modern life or the natural-scientific theories of shapes and animal typologies devised by Alphonse Toussenel.<sup>6</sup> The cartoon characters dwell in a play space that, for now, is animated through the imagination, as preparatory to the engendering of new habits of perception.

In these cartoon texts, capitalist instruments of labor operate the worker, and factory machinery gives this transposition a technically concrete form. Machinery turns animate, while humans become adjuncts to the machine. Film allows a working through of this plastic composite body, motivated as it is by shock and shudder and the shattering dis-articulations of laughter.<sup>7</sup> In a note on Baudelaire in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin refers to medieval legends that invoke the shock of the researcher who has turned to magic. Such shock experience is cited as the “decisive laughter of hell,” manifesting forces that exceed current knowledge. Benjamin tells us that Baudelaire—who had a passion for self-propelled toys—knew of this strident laughter and, referring back to his own study of the Baroque mourning play, he observes that, in laughter, matter takes on an abundance of spirit, in highly eccentric disguise. The muteness of matter is overcome in laughter. It becomes spiritual. These energies are similar to those that animate the commodity world in its fetishism. Such a magically spirited, over-lively environment is as much the world of the commercial advertisement as it is the world of Mickey Mouse or the world of Richter's *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, or of any work that endows matter with dislodging shocks. To rephrase what Benjamin says about Baudelaire's hearing of shrill laughter, it re-echoes in *our* ears and gives us much to think about—that is, concerning our possible reconstitutions (Benjamin 1999a: 325). It is a service provided by American slapstick no less than by Soviet film.

This kind of film is comic, but only in the sense that the laughter it provokes hovers over an abyss of horror. (Benjamin 1999b: 17)

In the one, technology is ludicrously unleashed to tease and amaze its human audience with new possibilities of motion and perception. In the other, as the class war is restaged in all its brutality, the destructive power of technology is evoked, and not infrequently alongside its redemptive potential. Each kind of text is a lesson and proposal in one.

### Radio

A fractured world: this is literally the subject of Benjamin's 1931 radio lecture on the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.<sup>8</sup> Here he is concerned to stress the latest discoveries in the science of seismology, which show that the earth is dynamic, animated, always trembling, though we humans may not consciously notice it. The earth is not a passive entity, but a historically shifting cosmic whole in dynamic interrelation with itself, as well as with us and with technology. He tells us we now know that storms affect the earth's crust. Mountains erode. The seabed becomes denser with accretions. The earth cools and rocks are fractured by tensions. The gravitational pull of extra-terrestrial bodies also affects the earth's surface. It was thought previously—from the Greeks through Kant, until the discoveries of 1870—that earthquakes were caused by gases and burning vapours in the centre of the earth. In fact, he notes, earthquakes do not come, as people may imagine, from the innermost core of the earth, which is thought of as being liquid, or mud-like. Rather, they arise from events in the earth's crust. It is the surface that erupts, not the deep internality. The crust is in a state of permanent turmoil. Matter is constantly moving, and through the endless displacement of tectonic plates—like the cut-ups and re-configurations of montage—the earth is ever striving to achieve equilibrium. Its animate quest for stability becomes our destabilization in the form of earthquakes (Benjamin 2014: 162). With its hidden dynamics opened up in some degree to

modern seismological stations in Germany and elsewhere, this active body now encounters modern technology, as mediated through humans and their social relations. Benjamin is optimistic here about future relations between humans and their quaking planet. Technology will find a way out, through prediction, thereby giving the most advanced instruments a status at least equal to the acute sensory organs of dogs, who are agitated in the days before a significant earthquake (2014: 163).

It was on radio that the mature Benjamin engaged in his most sustained pedagogical work, most specifically in his numerous lectures for the Youth Hour. He grasped radio as preeminently a pedagogical medium. It could bring to its listeners educational experiences, some of which demanded participation, if it followed the logic of its technical form. He also involved himself, from the mid-1920s, in radio-plays and experimental “listening models,” some directed at children and others at the general radio-listening public. Benjamin’s radio work—which extended to around eighty broadcasts—was made possible by the Weimar Republic’s liberal media policy. Innovating figures such as Hans Flesch, brother-in-law of composer Paul Hindemith, and Ernst Schoen took over regional cultural programming. Flesch, for example, in his first broadcasts in 1924 carried out live sound experiments to make the audience aware of the mediation of the material. He commissioned radio plays by Brecht and Weill, introduced Ernst Krenek to radio music, and in 1931 set up the first German studio for electronic radio work. Schoen was less of a formal experimenter than Flesch. His fascination was with radio drama that explored sociological and everyday situations. For Walter Benjamin, who worked closely with Schoen, radio work was a way of developing and testing his theories of media culture and of the changing position of the cultural producer and intellectual. Several of his major studies tracked the fluctuating fortunes of artists and intellectuals from the nineteenth century onwards. “The Author as Producer” (1934) and “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1935-1936) were intended as

investigations of the prospects for critical intellectuals in the modern age who did not wish to promote art as a new religion. Radio, with its capacity for popular enlightenment, offered one promising context for modern knowledge-workers.

Around 1931, Benjamin wrote “Reflections on Radio,” in which he theorized radio as a form of mass culture attuned to montage and the experimental. But radio fails to fulfill its potential. The most crucial failing is its perpetuation of a “fundamental separation between performer and audience, a separation that is undermined by its technological basis” (2014: 363). Benjamin argues here that even a child knows that “it is in the interest of radio to bring anyone before the microphone at any opportunity, making the public witness to interviews and conversations in which anyone might have a say.” Radio is a potentially democratic space in which as many voices as possible should be heard. A basis in montage, a reproducible nature, an activating appeal to audiences, simultaneous distantiation and intimacy: all these were part of the promise of the new media:

Never has there been a genuine cultural institution that was not legitimized by the expertise it inculcated in the audience through its forms and technology.

(Benjamin 2014: 363)

But the technical possibilities have been rarely explored. Benjamin’s judgment on contemporary radio is harsh. It has not challenged the overriding “consumer mentality” of the age, whereby “dull, inarticulate masses” have been created, incapable of judgment, unable to express their sentiments. Radio has failed to work with its technological and formal aspects—such as the tone and manner of the voice. What it must do, Benjamin argues, is create listeners with expertise, a new expertise appropriate to the medium. Radio can create expert radio listeners, that is, people who are sonically-attuned, actively engaged in what they hear, and excited by the possibilities specific to radio, rather than people who see reflected in the new medium their supposedly already existing interests—novels, classical music, or travel reportage.

Benjamin had grasped the opportunity to present on radio, but for him too it was a learning process. In 1934 he wrote a short newspaper piece entitled “To The Minute,” which hovers between fiction and autobiography. It was also composed as a kind of learning model, offering a theory of how the voice might be deployed on radio. It proposed a way of thinking about the collective of listeners as a mass of individuals:

After an application process lasting months, I finally got a commission from the station management at D...., to entertain the listeners for twenty minutes with a report from my specialist area, booklore. Were my chatting to find an echo, then there was the prospect of a regular repetition of such dispatches. The department manager was kind enough to point out to me that, along with the composition of such reflections, the manner of their delivery was crucial. “Beginners,” he said, “commit the error of believing that they are holding their lecture in front of a more or less large public, which just happens to be invisible. Nothing could be further from the truth. The radio listener is almost always alone. And even assuming that one reaches thousands of listeners, one is only ever reaching thousands of single listeners. One should always act as if one is speaking to a single person—or to lots of single people, if you wish: but never to a large gathering.” (Benjamin 1981: 761)

The other lesson which is communicated involves time. Radio was a medium which insisted on sticking to clock-time. The radio station manager insists that one “finish on the dot!” The piece goes on to tell the tale of a bumbling presenter, perhaps Benjamin himself, inside the “modern broadcast studio, where everything was set up to serve the complete comfort of the speaker, the uninhibited blossoming of his abilities.” Glancing at the clock face, he is alarmed to see how much time has passed and thinks he must speed up with the reading of his script.

Only decisive action would help: whole sections needed to be sacrificed. The considerations leading up to the conclusion would have to be improvised. Tearing myself away from my text was not without dangers. But I had no other choice. I mustered my energy, turned over several pages of my manuscript, while I dwelled for an extended period, and finally landed happily, like a pilot on his airfield, into the sphere of thought of the concluding section. (763)

But then he realizes he has misread the clock and has ended too soon. A terror grips him in the silence, which is being multiplied in a thousand ears and parlours. He grabs a random sheet and stretches out the vowels of the words and inserts apparently meaningful pauses. In this way, he reaches the end. The broadcast time has not yet become habitual for him. In this challenging new environment he is a child whose first effort is a failure, and who must repeat again and again until it becomes integrated into his mode of being. Benjamin's anecdote teaches us about the new accord of humans and technology. The time is the time of the radio machine. Before it the performance is made, but it is conveyed into homes, where it will be judged by mass audiences. There is a kick at the end of the story. A friend the next day praises the show but bemoans the fact that the radio receiver lost the transmission for a minute. Technology and humans are still, it would seem, learning to communicate with each other.

Benjamin sought ways to work with the technical possibilities of radio, and, specifically, to encourage audiences to reflect upon the medium to which they were exposed. One of Benjamin's broadcast programs was a radiophonic work aimed at children, *Radau Um Kasperl* (Much Ado about Kasper), from 1932.<sup>9</sup> This experiments with the proper place and tone of radio discourse. It asks who the subject of radio might be. It incorporates dialect and sonic play. It reflects on the space of radio in the home, its breaking through the separations

of public and private zones. It reflects too on the alienation and commodification of cultural labor.

The program *Funkspiele* (Radio Games) was broadcast in January 1932. It was announced in the following way in the *Südwestdeutsche Rundfunk-Zeitung*:

Saturday evening brings a type of literary society game from former and more musical times and, simultaneously, neatly concealed, a not futile psychological and pedagogical experiment, with the title “Radio Games,” led by Dr Walter Benjamin.

A list of unconnected keywords is declaimed from a microphone to a child, a woman, a poet, a journalist, a businessman—human types which could be expanded or substituted at will. Together with the host, their task is to translate these words into a short, meaningful story.<sup>10</sup>

The listeners were invited to rate the different efforts and to have a go themselves, their results being published in the radio station’s journal. The words chosen for the task were ones that were at least double in meaning: *Kiefer*; *Ball*; *Strauß*; *Kamm*; *Bauer*; *Atlas* (pine/jaw; ball; bouquet/ostrich/struggle; comb/ridge/neck; farmer/cage; atlas/satin). The lesson was one about the mutability and capaciousness of language. Imagination, pop Surrealism, and a pedagogic reflection on language all emerged in Benjamin’s version of radio culture.

### Toys, children’s tools

In 1930, Walter Benjamin delivered two radio lectures for children on the subject of toys. One program concerns his trail through the department stores and toyshops of Berlin seeking toys from his childhood and observing what now entertains Weimar youth. The journey through Berlin’s Kaufhaus Des Westens and other stores takes him into the past, as he reveals something of the web of social relations into which particular toys were born. The

carved wooden toys so characteristic of German playthings were a product of a particular climate and mode of production, he notes. Long winter days meant that the inhabitants of the forests, the peasants and artisans, who in the summer would sell their wares to travelers, were blocked in by snowy streets and iced-up passes. To pass the time, they took wood, the material that was abundant locally, and began to carve. The craftsmen whittled wood into toys and, over time, they honed their skills and the toys became more complex. In summer the travelers who came to buy the usual goods available to the world of adult commerce would also buy the toys as gifts for their children. In this way the toys began their wanderings. Sailors came upon them sometimes and took them on their travels, to “Astrakhan and Archangel, to Petersburg and Cadiz, even, Africa and the West Indies,” to exchange with islanders for valuable stones, pearls and bronzes (Benjamin 2014: 48). Benjamin’s wanderings through Berlin in search of toys turn into the toys’ wandering through the world. A miniaturized toy world is released, it would seem, into the larger world. It is its double, its playful other, a world of topsy-turvyness, a world through the looking glass. For the toys are more valuable to some than gems; they are playthings but of crucial usefulness, this-world objects that spawn vagaries of imagination. Products of the snow and freeze, they move fluidly across the seawaters and enmesh themselves in children’s and parents’ lives.

At the close of the second radio lecture on Berlin toys from 1930, Benjamin invokes the Romantic author Clemens Brentano. The interiors of the bottles that Benjamin’s toy searches in the shops of Berlin have evoked, with their model ships, crucifixions, mountains and hardened wax, look to him like the magical land of Vadutz, which Brentano describes in the introduction to his fairy tale “Gockel, Hinkel and Gackeleia” from 1838. Brentano writes:

All the magical mountains from storybooks, the world of fables and fairy tales, Himmelaya, Meru, Albordi, Kaf, Ida, Olympus and the Glass Mountains lie for me in the little land of Vadutz. (Benjamin 2014: 49)



Vadutz is the imaginary country where Brentano located all the playthings that he loved. Vadutz is therefore a place ripe for exploration, whose geography and tales will charge and shape the imagination of self and family. It is the world of childhood. It is preserved as a memory, or a fantasy space, under glass. It is the place of true education, far from the oppressive environment of the Kaiser Friedrich-Wilhelm gymnasium school in Berlin, where Benjamin had learned only the culture of the moribund and inventoried.

Alongside models from the world of art and more-or-less-high culture, Benjamin's attention is drawn to popular—or even trivial—forms that bemuse the viewer, who is then impelled to make sense of them. Rebus puzzles were one such form. These seem to be beloved of children at an age when they still find themselves in a struggle with language and its connection to things. Rebuses were once, Benjamin apprises the reader, assumed to take their name from *rêver*, to dream, rather than from *res*, thing.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin evokes all of the dreamwork's function of transfiguration, condensation, and generation of antitheses. Such imaginative procedures rekindle matter and, for Benjamin, signal an impulse—alive in children—to revolutionary overhauling. In children's books, where word and image are prone to play together, the world is presented not as an exhibition for pacified contemplation but as an entity to be appropriated, its mismatching or widely strewn parts to be drawn together in the imaginative activity of children. Movement between word and image, through lively twirling lines on the page, garners access to a still mysterious world.

Benjamin's essay "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books" from 1926 expounds the transformative impulse of children as they learn to play and play to learn. Children in play transform both their object world and themselves. They enter into their picture books, as if they were clouds "suffused with the riotous colours of the world of pictures" (Benjamin 1996: 435). The impulse that fascinated Benjamin, whether in a child or just in the childlike, works to renew matter by unleashing various fusions and detonations. It

must approach matter without prejudice or convention. It eschews logic. It creates unfamiliar, sketchy worlds that need to be entered into and made habitual. It demands imagination and the preparedness to start from scratch.

In these new imaginative worlds, that which is apparently valueless becomes precious, much as the household's discarded silver foil became precious silver in the child-Benjamin's hands. For the child, his chest of drawers is an arsenal and a zoological garden, a crime museum and a crypt.

To tidy up, to throw away or to put things in a designated place, would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tin foil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields. (Benjamin 1996: 465)

These scraps are repurposed and given new life, or another life. This is a world in which the child remolds nature, but according to imagination and to social prompts from the adult world that will one day, even if in alienated form, become his or hers.

Sometime in 1931 or 1932, Benjamin jotted down a little note, "On Ships, Mine Shafts, and Crucifixes in Bottles," observing wryly that these kitsch objects may be artworks, according to a certain aesthetic philosophy, since their contents are withdrawn from touch. He makes reference, in this note on things under glass, to the panopticons—specifically, to the *panoptikum* that was a waxworks museum, with dark drapes and grotesque wax replicas of anatomical parts. Commenting in the *Arcades Project* on *Panoptikum* as a popular name for wax museums at the turn of the nineteenth century, Benjamin observes that they are a manifestation of the "total work of art": "Pan-opticon: not only does one see everything, but one sees it in all ways" (Benjamin 1999a: 531). Objects under glass and the wax cabinet alike seem to liberate vision in all directions: everything can be seen—body parts, innards, ships, mountain ranges—and in all ways, as the cabinet is circled or the bottle twirled in the hand.

In his fragment on objects in bottles, Benjamin is reminded of a remark made by Adolf Loos in relation to Goethe and recorded by Franz Glück:

While reading Goethe's rebuke to philistines and many other art lovers who like to touch copper engravings and reliefs, the idea came to him that anything that can be touched cannot be a work of art, and anything that is a work of art should be placed out of reach. (Benjamin 1999b: 554)

Benjamin retorts: "Does this mean that these objects in bottles are works of art *because* they have been placed out of reach?" The question, a playful one, opens a way to the reevaluation of the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility. Artworks, or at least newly made technologically reproducible artworks, are things to be grabbed by postcard collectors or magazine browsers. Such things meet their audiences halfway. They descend from the walls of galleries and enter homes, if only in reproduced form. Speaking once of toys, specifically Russian toys made by craft labor, which he had seen and had photographed in a museum in the Soviet Union, Benjamin notes that they are not artworks, precisely because of their relation to the hand that made them and the hand that will play with them:

Toy is hand tool—not artwork.<sup>12</sup>

That is to say, these toys, and maybe all toys, are tools, something of use, though that is not to say simply utilitarian. They are tools for grasping the world of larger forms on which they are based. They are made by hand and, as the child plays, are manipulated by the hand. Fineness of form is not the crucial thing. Rather, what matters is the effectiveness with which they allow the child to prise a way into the world of play and, beyond that, into the world itself, though that world be fuzzy and indistinct, a place where the child has to linger a while, involved in games that may yet prove to be the truest science. The hand that holds a world is a hand that opens the way to a more genuine understanding.

Play is emphasized in Benjamin's thoughts on habits. Play is a mode of overcoming the world and becoming worldly. One of the aspects of children's play that Benjamin highlights is "the law of repetition" (1999b: 120). This repetition in play is not, he insists, solely about the mastery of fear but is also about enjoying victory and triumphs, or learning how to do things. The conquest is in learning how to manage everyday life. As he puts it:

The transformation of a shattering experience into habit—that is the essence of play. (1999b: 120)

Benjamin cites Goethe in relation to this: "All things would be resolved in a trice, if we could only do them twice." But he notes that for a child twice is not enough. The child wants the same thing a hundred or a thousand times. In this way it learns to eat, sleep, dress, wash, and everything else. He writes here: "Habit enters life as a game, and in habit, even in its most sclerotic forms, an element of play survives to the end." Habit is a first form of happiness, if also our first horror, and it lives on inside us in a degraded or deformed mode. Is there not here something of an echo of the folk wisdom that makes of the tilling of the soil a treasure hunt?

The concern with habit is thus recurrent in Benjamin's thinking. In 1932, he wrote a short piece titled "*Einmal ist Keinmal*" (Once Is as Good as Never). In an early version of his thoughts on the phrase, he notes that the phrase "Once is as good as never" comes into its own in work, though not in the work of everyone:

Only not everyone is eager to uncover the innermost nature of the practices and arrangements from which this wisdom emerges. And far less is it a privilege of those folk who are rooted in the soil. But revolutionaries have best got to grips with this matter: Van Gogh in his early days when he shared the life of the Belgian miners, Adolf Loos as he tore apart the environment of the Viennese

middle-classes like a frangible rag, Trotsky as he erects a monument to his father's labors in Janovka. (Benjamin 1981: 1009)

In the finished version, Benjamin omits everything but the consideration of Trotsky's witnessing his father working with a sickle and acting all the while as if he were only practicing, "as if he were looking for a spot where he could really make a start."

Here we have the work habits of the experienced man who has learned every day and with every swing of the scythe to make a fresh start. He does not pause to look at what he has achieved; indeed, what he has done seems to evaporate under his hands and to leave no trace. Only hands like those will succeed in difficult things as if they were child's play, because they are cautious when dealing with easy ones. (Benjamin 1999b: 739)

The revolutionary turns habit-formation into a form of play—not an ossification but an act that knows how it has been won from a shattering.

In 1928, Benjamin wrote a review essay entitled "Toys and Play," in which he considers the repetitive aspect of children's playful engagements. The essay claims that children's play is a crucial topic that has effectively fallen by the wayside. It also insists that children's play instances a mode of thinking that extends beyond itself. It has the character of a model.

Folk art and the worldview of the child demanded to be seen as collective formations [*kollektive Gebilde*]. (1999b: 118 [trans. modified])

These collective formations will find an historical reflection in Benjamin's own epoch—in the Russian Revolution—but their outlines are originally drawn in relation to children, who are a mirror of a new collective. In post-revolutionary Moscow, Benjamin saw that "the liberated pride of the proletariat is matched by the emancipated bearing of the children" (1999b: 27). The Bolsheviks conjoined the action of collective emancipation—or at least its

outward sign—and the lives of children. In “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre,” Benjamin observes,

Just as the first action of the Bolsheviks was to hoist the Red flag, so their first instinct was to organize the children. (1999b: 202)

Here is a tangible sign of progress, according to Benjamin’s lexicon. The metaphorical relays between children, proletarians, revolutionaries occur in another essay, “Old Toys,” from 1928, where Benjamin assails the pipe dreams of pedagogues, along with various other adults.

But we must not forget that the most enduring modifications in toys are never the work of adults, whether they be educators, manufacturers, or writers, but are the results of children at play. Once mislaid, broken, and repaired, even the most princely doll becomes a capable proletarian comrade in the children’s play commune. (1999b: 101)

Both the revolutionary and the child adapt the materials of the everyday, developing new habits, shattering old ones, and rebuilding as a process of learning. In so doing, they teach the teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> See Benjamin 1989: 360n4.

<sup>2</sup> For these concepts, see “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1931), in Benjamin 1999b: 217.

<sup>3</sup> For Adorno’s critical use of the term, see his letter of September 6, 1936, to Benjamin, in Adorno and Benjamin 1999: 146. Adorno writes here, in immediate reference to Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” and his Work of Art essay, of “an *anthropological materialism* that I cannot accept. It is as if for you the human body represents the measure of all concreteness [*Mass der Konkretion*].”

<sup>4</sup> See “Old Toys” (1928), in Benjamin 1999b: 101.

<sup>5</sup> See “Response to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,” in Benjamin 1999b: 16-19.

<sup>6</sup> Fourier, Grandville, and Toussenel all figure significantly in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*.

<sup>7</sup> See Benjamin 1999a: 325 (Convolute J54, 1): “Laughter is shattered articulation.”

<sup>8</sup> See “The Lisbon Earthquake,” in Benjamin 2014: 158-63.

<sup>9</sup> See Benjamin 2014: 201-20.

<sup>10</sup> *Südwestdeutsche Rundfunk-Zeitung*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1932): 2

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<sup>11</sup> See Benjamin 1981: 611. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the word rebus derives from the ablative of Latin *res*, thing—as used in the phrase *de rebus quae geruntur*, meaning “concerning things that are taking place.” This was the title given by the guild of lawyers’ clerks of Picardy to satirical pieces containing riddles in picture form.

<sup>12</sup> “Spielzeug ist Handwerkzeug—nicht Kunstwerk.” Benjamin Archive, Ms604, reproduced in Benjamin 2007: 73.