Chapter 9
The Dialectical Turn of 'Primitive Thinking': The Child and Gesture in Walter Benjamin

In "Walter Benjamin und sein Engel" (1967; "Walter Benjamin and his Angel," 1991), Gershom Scholem recalls that "it is one of Benjamin's most important characteristics that throughout his life he was attracted with almost magic force by the child's world and ways."[1] Benjamin's writings, especially those from the mid-1920s onwards,[2] reveal a marked interest in children's activities and objects, their games, toys, and books, which, beginning in 1924, he addresses in a wide range of reviews and then from 1931 in reflections on his own childhood memories. This interest is also manifest in his writings on contemporary literature and on the philosophy of history formulated in the context of his *Passagenwerk* (1982 [1927–1940], *The Arcades Project*, 2002).

Benjamin began collecting children's books as early as 1918 – likely sparked by his son's birth. In drafts of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin notes that the occasion for immersion in and awakening from the dreamworld of childhood is one's own children.[3] Similarly, Scholem posits that Benjamin's "profound interest and absorption in the world of the child" was related to his own son's childhood.[4] However, Benjamin's interest in childhood had already been evident in his writings on fantasy and color from the mid-1910s, which repeatedly reference "the

1 Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays,* ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2012), 175.

2 Parts of this chapter have been published as Nicola Gess, "Magisches Denken im Kinderspiel. Literatur und Entwicklungspsychologie im frühen 20. Jahrhundert," in *Literatur als Spiel. Evolutionsbiologische, ästhetische und pädagogische Aspekte. Beiträge zum Deutschen Germanistentag 2007,* ed. Thomas Anz and Heinrich Kaulen (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009); "Walter Benjamin und 'die Primitiven.' Reflexionen im Umkreis der Berliner Kindheit," *Text+Kritik. Zeitschrift für Literatur. Walter Benjamin* nos. 31–32 (2009); "Gaining Sovereignty: The Figure of the Child in Benjamin's Writing," trans. Joel Golb, *Modern Language Notes* 125, no. 3 (2010); and "'Schöpferische Innervation der Hand.' Zur Gestensprache in Benjamins *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*," in *Benjamin und die Anthropologie*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger, Ben Morgan, and Anthony Phelan (Freiburg: Rombach, 2012). The translation of this chapter is indebted to the article above translated by Joel Golb and is a product of both Golb's and Erik Butler's and Susan L. Solomon's translation efforts.

3 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 390.

4 Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship,* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: NYRB, 1981), 82.

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pure seeing"[5] of the child. Benjamin's first turn toward childhood coincided, then, with a turn from the youth movement (1914–1915) and from his teacher Gustav Wyneken, an active reformer in the movement. This confluence of events is significant on two levels: some motifs used by reform pedagogy and the youth movement persist in Benjamin's works, yet he clearly mobilizes them in modified form against these very movements.

Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* satirizes the youth movement's cult of childhood with the character Hans Sepp, who enthusiastically reflects how

> the child was creative, it was growth personified and constantly engaged in creating itself. The child was regal by nature, born to impose its ideas, feelings, and fantasies on the world; oblivious to the ready-made world of accidentals, it made up its own world. It had its own sexuality. In destroying creative originality by stripping the child of its own world, suffocating it with the dead stuff of traditional learning, and training it for specific utilitarian functions alien to its nature, the adult world committed a barbaric sin. The child was not goal-oriented – it created through play, its work was play and tender growth; when not deliberately interfered with, it took on nothing that was not utterly absorbed into its nature; every object it touched was a living thing; the child was a world, a cosmos unto itself, in touch with the ultimate, the absolute, even though it could not express it. But the child was killed by being taught to serve worldly purposes and being chained to the vulgar routines so falsely called reality![6]

Some of Sepp's ideas appear in Benjamin's writings as well. However, closer inspection reveals crucial differences in his handling of them. For instance, Benjamin calls the nature of children's creativity into question by asking whether their fantasy is purely receptive or destructively constructive. Obvious differences also exist in Sepp's assumption that the child has no interest in the existing world – Benjamin's ideas about children's play assume the opposite. Also, for him, the child does not create itself, but remains subject to ontogenetic as well as to historical and sociological conditions. As for the child's ability to intuit "the absolute," Benjamin acknowledges as much only insofar as children possess superior mimetic gifts of reception and observation.

Benjamin was well informed on research in child psychology and education published in his time, but (with some exceptions) he criticized it sharply. Thus,

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5 Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, *1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). See Heinz Brüggemann, *Walter Benjamin über Spiel, Farbe und Phantasie* (Würzburg: Königshausen + Neumann, 2007), especially Section II ("Phantasie und Farbe"). Cf. the closely related notion of the innocent eye (Ruskin) in chapter 5 of the book at hand.

6 Musil, *Man Without Qualities*, 604.

while still involved in the youth movement, he wrote to Wyneken about a research assignment the latter had given him:

> I've looked through [...] *Zeitschrift für pädagogische Psychologie* except for [volumes] 4 and 6–10 [...] at the library here, all of *Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie*, and *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Pädagogik,* apart from volume 5 [...]. One gets the impression that the state of ideas in pedagogy is awful. [...] No new ideas are being produced at all; thanks to *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Päd*., I was made aware, in particular, of the systematic musings of the Hebartians, which obviously bear no fruit at all.[7]

His impression did not change after his abandonment of the movement. However, his criticism now shifted to the newer (reform) pedagogies themselves.[8] In "Alte vergessene Kinderbücher" (1924; "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1996), he faults Enlightenment philanthropists for having tried to educate the young with "incomprehensible" books as "dry as dust" in order to make "creatures of nature" into "the most pious, the best, and the most sociable beings of all." But even worse, in his eyes, are the errors induced by "supposed insights into the child's psyche"[9] carried out by the newer pedagogy. Benjamin contends that these pedagogues are more interested in their own success than the child's. Their "infatuation with psychology"[10] is driven by their attempt to capture a larger audience.

> A pride in our psychological insight into the internal life of the child [...] has engendered a literature whose complacent courting of the modern public obscures the fact that it has sacrificed an ethical content which lent dignity even to the most pedantic efforts of neoclassical pedagogy. This ethical content has been replaced by a slavish dependence on the slogans of the daily press.[11]

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7 Benjamin to Gustav Wyneken, 19 June 1913, in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 1: 115. This letter has not been published in any English editions of Benjamin's correspondence.

8 Cf. Eva Geulen, "Legislating Education. Kant, Hegel, and Benjamin on 'Pedagogical Violence,'" *Cardozo Law Review* 26, no. 3 (2005), who observes that Benjamin, in spite of the criticism he voiced, held on to some of the demands of the youth movement and pedagogical reform (e. g., "self-education" and "stress on the collective's role" [951]). Benjamin's theory culminates in paradox: "The task of education is the 'formation' of a moral will that, as absolute norm, resists by definition any and all means of its educational production. The conflict between the means and ends of education is radicalized to the point of rendering (moral) education impossible" (952). Cf. also Davide Giuriato, "Tintenbuben. Kindheit und Literatur um 1900 (Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Walser, Walter Benjamin)," *Poetica* 42, nos. 3–4 (2010): 345–347.

9 Walter Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, *1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 407.

10 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 408.

11 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 412.

Benjamin considers the resulting image of the child to be a "thoroughly modern prejudice." Children are viewed as "esoteric, incommensurable beings" for whom a special line of products is to be devised.[12] The "cloying"[13] results are "depressingly distorted jolliness,"[14] "hellish exuberance,"[15] and a simplicity that is false because it is based on form, not on the process by which the toy is produced.[16] Unlike Musil's Hans Sepp, Benjamin does not take issue with the forced adaptation of children to the adult world undertaken by the older pedagogy. Indeed, the "remote and indigestible" impositions may even prove appropriate to the precise mindset of children and their demand for "clear, comprehensible, but not childlike books."[17] Rather, Benjamin objects to a false conception of childhood that ultimately follows a colonialist logic and "betrays what is most genuine and original" when "the child's affectionate and self-contained fantasy is understood as a psychic demand in the sense of a commodity-producing society and education [...] as a colonialist sales opportunity to distribute cultural goods,"[18] i.e., entertainment products (sold for children) and pedagogical writings (peddled to adults).[19]

In this light, toys say more about how grown-ups see children than anything else. Benjamin observes the cultic origins of many traditional toys, which served "to ward off evil spirits."[20] Now, along similar lines but to opposite effect, toys subject them to the "hideous features of commodity capital."[21] The "perceptual world of the child" hardly occupies "a fantasy realm, a fairy-tale land of pure childhood,"[22] then. Only what children seek out and create for themselves is meaningful, for this is how they engage with the adult world.

> Children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, house-

12 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 408.
13 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 412.
14 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 407.
15 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1, *1927–1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 119.
16 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 2.1: 119.
17 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 407.
18 Walter Benjamin, "Kolonialpädagogik," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3: 273; cf. Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 119.
19 Benjamin, "Kolonialpädagogik," 3: 273; cf. 129. Benjamin considers this "kind of children's psychology" the "exact counterpart of the celebrated 'psychology of peoples in a state of nature'" (273).
20 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 2.1: 118.
21 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 2.1: 119.
22 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 2.1: 118.

> work, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.[23]

This famous passage from "Old Forgotten Children's Books," which also appears in "One-way Street,"[24] addresses central motifs – the wastefulness of manufacture, collecting and bricolage, the "face" of "the world of things" – that bridge Benjamin's conception of childhood with his philosophy of history (to which I will return).[25] In place of a domestication of the "child's soul" through analysis, conceptualization, and educational practice, as proposed in the "colonial pedagogy" (*Kolonialpädagogik*) he condemns, Benjamin advocates an approach that is "not psychologically but materially" oriented – which is to say not around the "child's soul" but rather around toys. [26] This approach would involve formulating a physiognomy[27] of the child's objects and activities that in its essayistic form avoids instrumentalization and – crucially – the conventional discourse on the child as a better person.

Such discourse is circulated by Karl Groos, among others. Speaking on behalf of his guild, he declares the child a "loveable"[28] object of research. Accordingly, reflections on possibly amoral conduct among children play a smaller role for developmental psychologists than would be expected, given the parallels constructed between children and figurations of the 'primitive' (see Chapter 3).[29] Criticism that already applied to Enlightenment philanthropists thus held even more for the developmental psychologists of Benjamin's day, whom he ridicules as "meek and mild educators still cling[ing] to Rousseauesque dreams" of idealized childhood. [30] Educational reformers, in particular, enshrined children as an-

23 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 408.

24 Benjamin, "One-Way Street," 1: 450.

25 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 408.

26 Benjamin to Siegfried Kracauer, 21 December 1927, in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997) 3: 316. This letter has not been published in any English editions of Benjamin's correspondences.

27 On this point, Benjamin acts in the capacity of the collector, whom he defines as the "physiognomist of the domestic interior" (*Arcades Project*, 20); he also understands the child as a collector – see below pages 326 f.

28 Karl Groos, *Das Seelenleben des Kindes*, 2.

29 For counterexamples (such as the "wicked child"), see chapter 3.

30 Benjamin, "Old Toys," *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1, *1927–1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 101.

gels and geniuses by nature. Musil's Hans Sepp likewise dreams of a childlike "world of ideals" and sees children's play as characterized by tenderness.[31] In striking contrast, Benjamin acknowledges the "grotesque, cruel, grim side of children's life," the "despotic and dehumanized element" that makes them "insolent and remote from the world."[32] How is one to understand this?

This chapter argues that Benjamin took the child as the model for an enchanting/disenchanting (i. e., dialectical) approach to alterity and history and in this way also as an inspiration for his *Arcades Project*. Benjamin's child functions as a utopian figure. This is, however, not in the Romantic sense of children in harmony with nature, but in view of both the "barbaric" and, above all, "primitive" tendencies they display.[33] The destructive and mimetic potential of these tendencies come together in children's play, leading dialectically to an acquisition of sovereignty in which intimacy with history and the Other, analytical destruction, and steadily new creation intertwine with one another.[34]

The Child as 'Barbarian'

If one reads the satires in *Neues Kinderspielzeug* (1913; "A New Kind of Plaything," 2012) by Mynona (Salomo Friedländer) and *Geheimes Kinderspielbuch* by Joachim Ringelnatz,[35] both of which Benjamin cited in "Old Toys," it seems that the "grim side" of children's life primarily involves the lust for destruction and the amorality associated with it. But in this mimesis of the adult world, the child exposes above all the fragility of *adults'* moral ideas (and that is certainly the main concern of Friedländer and Ringelnatz's texts). In any event, beyond this satirical and socially critical dimension, the attention Benjamin pays to the child's destructive pleasure is also tied to the disenchantment of the romantic image of childhood practiced in psychoanalysis.

According to Freud, the so-called death drive is more readily apparent in children than in adults: they act out their desire to destroy what is living, whether inwardly or outwardly directed, in a relatively open way. Benjamin repeatedly

31 Musil, *Man Without Qualities*, 604.

32 Benjamin, "Old Toys," 2.1: 101.

33 Cf. Pan, *Primitive Renaissance*, 6 – 16, which, disregarding the author's primitivistic conception of the child, does not include Benjamin; on the distinction between "barbarian" and "primitive" in reference to Nietzsche, see 66 – 82.

34 Regarding the concept of sovereignty used here, see page 329 and footnote 154.

35 Cf. Brüggemann, *Walter Benjamin über Spiel, Farbe und Phantasie*, 109 – 111.

refers to "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," where Freud develops the concept of the death drive – such a reference is found a few months after the publication of "Old Toys," for example. And he does so in connection with child's play, whose urge toward repetition he understands, with Freud, as an expression of the death drive:

> the obscure urge to repeat things is scarcely less powerful in play, scarcely less cunning in its workings, than the sexual impulse in love. It is no accident that Freud has imagined he could detect an impulse "beyond the pleasure principle" in it.[36]

He concludes that children's play is animated by destructive desire and is meant to avoid change and achieve stasis (as he puts it, to turn "a shattering experience into habit"[37]). Indeed, destruction and repetition condition and reinforce each other: the tower must first be destroyed before it can be built again, so that the rebuilt tower can also be destroyed, and so on. At the same time, Benjamin follows Freud by identifying a culture-creating impulse at work: sublimation. He recognizes an emancipatory and self-empowering component in children's acts of destruction, which takes the form of rehearsing small victories over and over.

A third possible way of understanding Benjamin's talk of "dehumanized children" is provided by his essay on Karl Kraus, which discusses "a creature [*Unmensch*] sprung from the child and the cannibal."[38] In Benjamin's reading of Kraus, the child stands for an original purity, and the man-eater for a destruction of the mythical order upon which modern civilization rests. The two concepts (of original purity and destruction) meet up in the monstrous creature (*Unmensch*), insofar as "not purity but purification" stands "at the origin of creation."[39]

At the same time, there is something "man-eating" about children as well. Cited in "Old Toys," children's laughter at the "negative sides of life" [40] is tied to the pleasure they derive from playful imitation of destruction and here returns as the laughter of a bellicose humanity. Looking back at the First World War, Benjamin observes,

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36 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 2.1: 120. On Benjamin's connection to Freud here, see Doris Fittler, *'Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit': Frühe und späte Mimesis bei Walter Benjamin* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2005), 411–413.

37 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 2.1: 120.

38 Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," in *Selected Writings,* vol. 2, part 2, *1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 457.

39 Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 2.2: 455.

40 Benjamin, "Old Toys," 2.1: 101.

> the laughter of the infant carrying its foot to its mouth. This is how humankind began to nibble at itself fifteen years ago [*So begann die Menschheit vor fünfzehn Jahren von sich zu kosten*]. [...] It's the laughter of the sated infant. This humanity "devoured" everything.[41]

A problematic reading of war as the start of a necessary purification is at work here – a reading shared with other opponents of the Great War such as Benjamin's friend Ernst Bloch. Two years later, in the essay "Erfahrung und Armut" (1933; "Experience and Poverty," 1999), Benjamin returns to this constellation in the context of a "new, positive concept of barbarism." "Never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly," Benjamin writes; "strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers." The generation emerging from the war finds itself back in a landscape "in which nothing is the same except for [...] the tiny, fragile human body"[42] – a body Benjamin compares to a "newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present."[43] Yet the "poverty of experience" that characterizes this condition is not lamented so much as longed for. "With a laugh," people participate in the ultimate downfall of a culture they have long perceived as mendacious: [44] "They have 'devoured' everything, both 'culture and people,' and they have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them."[45] In their sleep, they dream of "completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures" that are no longer "human-like."[46]

The child then occupies a threefold position in this constellation of destruction and renewal. First, the child is the bare creature remaining after the destruction of previous humanity. This creature has not only survived the man-eating war, but is itself a man-eater by nature to the extent that it affirms and perpetuates the destruction of humankind. However, whereas the devastation of the anthropophagous order of war is instrumental, the child-creature's cannibalism manifests pure destruction: one that is only a manifestation of the death or life drive to the extent that what is at stake is its own survival. The monstrous creature (*Unmensch*), Benjamin writes,

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41 Benjamin, Notes on "Karl Kraus," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 1108; cf. Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 448.

42 Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, Pt. 2, *1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 732.

43 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 733.

44 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 735.

45 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 734.

46 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 733.

> has made a pact with the destructive side of nature. Just as the old conception of creaturely existence [*der alte Kreaturbegriff*] was based on love, [...] the new one, the conception of creaturely existence exemplified by the monster, is based on devouring: the cannibal purifies his relationship to fellow human beings by simultaneously satisfying the urge to eat.[47]

The question arises of how emancipation from the pressure of creaturely/monstrous drives might succeed. Benjamin's concept of a "positive barbarism" provides an answer.

The child is seen, secondly, as a "barbarian" in that barbarians are not only characterized by a "poverty of experience" but are driven by just this poverty "to begin from scratch, to make a new start."[48] That is precisely the outstanding feature of child's play as formulated by Benjamin in "Toys and Play": "a child creates the entire event anew and starts again right from the beginning."[49] This signifies more than the creaturely drive to tear down the old; it means that destruction creates the possibility for subsequent production. Such play does not simply act out a repetition compulsion; rather, the repetition is applied in such a way that hitherto unintuited prospects arise. The barbarian child creates nothing organic (these mythical concepts have also been "devoured") but is the draughtsman of "arbitrary, constructed nature,"[50] who recognizes the necessity for constant destruction of the old in order to create the possibility of a new beginning. Extended to the philosophy of language, this final point resembles Benjamin's conception of the allegorician, which will be taken up later in this chapter.[51]

Third, the child is the new being that emerges from the arbitrary constructions of the barbarian. This being no longer resembles the human; it has been "de-humanized" insofar as it requires the destruction of previous conceptions

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47 Benjamin, Notes on "Karl Kraus," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 1106.

48 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 732. Davide Giuriato also makes the connection between the child and the barbarian (*Mikrographien. Zu einer Poetologie des Schreibens in Walter Benjamins Kindheitserinnerungen* [*1932 – 1939*] [Munich: Fink, 2006], 16 – 17). Cf. Renate Reschke, "Barbaren, Kult und Katastrophen. Nietzsche bei Benjamin. Unzusammenhängendes im Zusammenhang gelesen," in *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her. Texte zu Walter Benjamin*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992); Manfred Schneider, *Der Barbar. Endzeitstimmung und Kulturrecycling* (Munich: Hanser, 1997), 210 – 215; Kevin McLaughlin, "Benjamin's Barbarism," *The Germanic Review* 81, no. 1 (2006); Sami Khatib, "Barbaric Salvage: Benjamin and the Dialectics of Destruction," *parallax* 24, no. 2 (2018).

49 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 2.1: 120.

50 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 733.

51 Regarding the allegorician in Benjamin's work, cf., e. g., Bettine Menke, *Sprachfiguren. Name-Allegorie-Bild nach Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Fink, 1991), 161 – 238; Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 95 – 133.

of "the humanly and of the human."[52] In the paralipomena to the Kraus essay, Benjamin refers to this new being, which has overcome the "mythical humanity" of old, as an "angel."[53] Taken together, these three aspects – the child as creature, barbarian, and angel – make it clear why the child represents a "transfiguration of creaturely existence [*Geschöpf*]"[54] as well as a "man-eater and angel" in one. Not the man-eater but the child is at the "heart of the monster [*Unmensch*]"[55] because the child offers not only ideas of the pure and primeval but also their linkage with destruction, and in this way the child already anticipates his angelic purification.[56]

Thus, in light of "Experience and Poverty," the figures Benjamin invokes can be arranged in the following relation: the destruction of the mythical order, and with it mythic man, provides the precondition for the "creature" to survive and be able, as a "barbarian," to construct a new "angel," which, as a "monster," is compelled by the principle of purifying destruction that enables new production. This entanglement of destruction and production, however, is only faintly discernible in the Kraus essay or "Der destructive Charakter" (1931; "The Destructive Character," 1978). In the former, Benjamin's reflections break off at the stage of creaturely existence, at which point the issue is only survival, not that something new should be constructed out of it. However, in the "power [...] to purify," lies the "hope [...] that something might survive this age."[57] "The Destructive Character" makes it even clearer that nothing new is to be expected: "The destructive character sees no image hovering before him. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed."[58] Here, too, the possibility of a new construction is only implied by the metaphor of the

52 Benjamin, Notes on "Karl Kraus," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2.2: 1112; cf. Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 733.

53 Benjamin, Notes on "Karl Kraus," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2.2: 1106.

54 Benjamin, Notes on "Karl Kraus," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2.2: 1103.

55 Benjamin, Notes on "Karl Kraus," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2.2: 1102.

56 Cf. Winfried Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamins Diskurs der Destruktion," *Studi germanici* 29 (1991), who identifies two fundaments of destructive discourse: interruption (in the dimensions of rhetoric and poetics, anthropology, theology, the philosophy of history, and the philosophy of language) and purification (in a theological, ritualistic, technical, and aesthetic sense).

57 Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 2.2: 455.

58 Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 2, *1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 541.

path running through the rubble, which the destructive character wishes to clear.[59]

In their denial of new construction, both texts point back to an earlier essay, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" (1921; "The Critique of Violence," 1978). Here, Benjamin elaborates the concept of a non-instrumental violence that de-poses or "suspends" (*ent-setzt*) the violence of law – which, for its part, traces back to myth[60] – but without at the same time putting anything new in its place. Structurally, it relates to the violence practiced by children in that their destruction is without purpose. Instead it is a manifestation of a drive and at the same time an emancipatory move, because it is directed against the violence of positing (*Setzung*). In the Kraus essay, this violence is very clearly carried out by the educator, but it is also found in a more general sense in the world of givens as a whole. For this reason, in "On the Critique of Violence," non-instrumental violence is not only tied to anarchy, but anarchy at the same time is connected to the child with Benjamin's reference to "childish anarchy."

Taken together, one can perhaps read those cautious references to a new construction in the two texts (i.e., "Karl Kraus" and "Destructive Character") as indications that purification is more than just annihilation in that it creates the possibility of a new beginning – without, however, a hint as to what the new might look like. The only certainty is that it would not posit (*setzen*) a new order: "First of all, for a moment at least, empty space – the place where the thing stood or the victim lived. Someone is sure to be found who needs

59 This aspect is made clear by Nicolas Pethes, *Mnemographie. Poetiken der Erinnerung und Destruktion nach Walter Benjamin* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999), 158–171, 367–390.

60 Myth as "the epitome of the persistence of the spell, of the lack of freedom (fate), of the repetition compulsion (the ever-same)" (Burkhardt Lindner, "Engel und Zwerg. Benjamins geschichtsphilosophische Rätselfiguren und die Herausforderung des Mythos," in *Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen*, ed. Lorenz Jäger and Thomas Regehly, Frankfurter Benjamin-Vorträge [Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1992], 238). Lindner determines that Benjamin's use of the term "myth" generally retains a negative connotation, whereas attention to the mythical aspect of related phenomena, especially in later writings, proves much more positive (239, 251–254). Winfried Menninghaus has also drawn attention to this point: "In 'Fate and Character' and 'On the Critique of Violence,' Benjamin 'defines' myth almost exclusively in terms of the fateful structure of time, the compulsion of the ever-same. [...] Then, in *Berlin Childhood* and 'One-Way Street,' as well as *The Arcades Project*, it dissolves into the multiplicity of narrow mythologies, which are more fleeting and impermanent than the mythical 'totalities' of old." (Menninghaus, *Schwellenkunde. Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986], 110) "Only as Benjamin moves toward his later works are the negative accents of myth 'dialecticized' with positive ones" (111). See also Burkhardt Lindner, "Das *Passagen-Werk*, die *Berliner Kindheit* und die Archäologie des 'Jüngstvergangenen,'" in *Studien zu Benjamin*, ed. Jessica Nitsche and Nadine Werner (Berlin: Kadmos, 2016), 232–235.

this space without occupying it."[61] "Experience and Poverty" also admits interpretation along these lines in that new designs are provisional and "arbitrary"[62] or, in other words, could also have been constructed differently. Without anything "determinate" or "settled" on them, they express no duration[63] and are "improvised."[64] Similarly, the "angel" in the Kraus essay "passes into nothingness"[65] as soon as it is created.

The thought of a destruction that enables creation, which Benjamin links to the figure of the child, stands in a larger context, which will be laid out in the following section. Benjamin's discussion of the child's other side, I will argue, reflects a specific concept of liberation, namely, liberation as a gaining of sovereignty. The linchpin of this notion is the dialectical turn from mimesis as compulsion (which he deems 'primitive') to mimesis as cunning, play, and bricolage – concepts Benjamin draws from the figure of the child and applies to his philosophy of language, his philosophy of history, and his way of writing. Through them he offers a dialectical way out from the "colonial pedagogy" of the day.

The Child as 'Primitive'

"Lehre vom Ähnlichen" (1933; "Doctrine of the Similar," 1977), which Benjamin wrote in connection with the "first piece"[66] of *A Berlin Childhood*, establishes a correspondence between children's play as the ontogenetic school of the mimetic faculty and the phylogeny of humankind, which is shaped by this faculty and its transformation. The child "[playing] at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train" is the counterpart of "ancients or even [...] primitive peoples," whose world abounds in "magical correspondences."[67] Like prehistoric humans, children obey the "compulsion to become similar and [...] to behave mimetically,"[68] which is expressed in their "transform[ation]" into the

61 Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," 2.2: 541. Cf. Pethes, *Mnemographie*, 373.
62 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 733.
63 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 734–735.
64 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2.2: 735.
65 Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 2.2: 457.
66 Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, February 1933, in Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, trans. Gary Smith and André Lefevere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 28.
67 Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," in *Selected Writings,* vol. 2, pt. 2, *1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 695.
68 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 698.

objects and words of their play. This passage is only the best known of many passages where Benjamin draws lines of connection between children and "primitive peoples." But before these lines can be discussed in more detail, I must address the question of what Benjamin means when he speaks of the 'primitive.'[69]

According to Scholem, Benjamin's engagement with the concept of the 'primitive' can be traced back to 1916, when his foray into theories of myth led him to take interest in "animism and pre-animism."[70] His main point of reference was Karl Theodor Preuss, a well-known ethnologist of the day: "[Benjamin] often used Preuss's remarks on pre-animism. This brought us to ghosts and their role in the pre-animistic age."[71] Early twentieth-century theories of pre-animism traced the first beginnings of religion to belief in an indeterminate, omnipresent magical force rather than the soul (which E.B. Tylor and Wilhelm Wundt, among others, considered the basis of animism[72]). Preuss understood pre-animism in the same way:

> There are reliable reports that a certain power, a magical force in [natural objects], is thought to be at work, which demonstrably has nothing to do with the elements from which the so-called concept of the soul has been formed, namely Melanesian *mana*, Iroquois *orenda*, and so on.[73]

Regarding this point, Preuss conjectured that a pre-animistic age of magic, distinguished by its belief in a general magical force, preceded the age of myth, which was defined by its belief in gods.

Benjamin follows Preuss in two respects: First, he accepts the existence of a pre-mythical age. A manuscript from 1918, "Anthropologie" (Anthropology),[74] outlines a speculative historical theory in which the pre-mythical age, marked by belief in ghosts, was superseded by a mythic age marked by belief in demons.

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69 For instance, in "Kolonialpädagogik" children are compared with "peoples in a state of nature" (273); in the *Arcades Project*, affirming the repetition of phylogeny in ontogeny, Benjamin declares that "the embryo in the womb relives the life of animals" (*Arcades Project*, 106). Two reviews ("Kulturgeschichte des Spielzeugs" and "Spielzeug und Spielen" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3: 116, 128) mention the cultic origins of various toys (balls, pinwheels, kites, and rattles) – a thesis already advanced by Tylor.

70 Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of A Friendship*, 40.

71 Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of A Friendship*, 40 – 41.

72 Arguing against E.B. Tylor, R.R. Marett coined the influential phrase "preanimistic religion" in a 1900 article: "Preanimistic Religion" (1900), in *The Threshold of Religion* (London: Methuen, 1914). His reflections were taken up (and modified) by his contemporaries in discussions of *mana* and related beliefs.

73 Preuss, *Die geistige Kultur der Naturvölker*, 19.

74 Benjamin, "Schema zur Anthropologie," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6: 64.

The latter, which had witnessed the emergence of law and positing language, was in turn replaced by the age of justice and revelation. In this age's overthrow of the other, one can locate the purely suspending (i.e., not positing) divine violence from "On the Critique of Violence." In contrast, the relationship between the ghostly age and the age of justice is thought to have proceeded not by revolutionary succession but through "sublation." This distinction is crucial both for understanding the importance that the pre-mythic age has for Benjamin and for central categories of his thinking such as salvation and awakening. In a dialectical turn, justice salvages elements of the ghostly into the new age, but with a decisive modification. The difference is between compulsion and freedom; a dialectical turn from mimetic compulsion and the drive to destruction toward the gaining of sovereignty, which is achieved in the passage through mimesis and expressed in analytical destruction and open-ended production.

Second, Benjamin also followed Preuss in ascribing the "primitive" with a pre-animistic belief in a mysterious magical force – a "mimetic force"[75] – pervading the world: "Mimetic genius [was] a life-determining power of the ancients"; in keeping with the parallels between phylogeny and ontogeny, "full possession of this gift" is "to be attributed to the newborn"[76] as well. Elsewhere, Benjamin also speaks of the "gift of mimesis, which was peculiar to mankind in its early times and today only works unbroken in the child."[77] For Benjamin, then, the 'primitive' world is stamped by an omnipresent "mimetic force" of whose "objective existence" (*Vorhandensein*)[78] he is convinced. He writes, "not only are [...] resemblances imported into things by virtue of chance comparisons on our part, but [...] all of them [...] are the effects of an active, mimetic force working expressly inside things."[79] Thus, here mimesis is not understood as the establishment of a relation, but substantialized (to use Cassirer's term, who Benjamin read very carefully): the mimetic force is a substance of its own that works in things and, as such, evokes similarities between them.

It would take me too far afield to explore all of the fine points of Benjamin's mimetic theory, but a few of the theory's features are important for the present discussion. For Benjamin mimetic force is the grounding for a "magical commu-

75 Walter Benjamin, "On Astrology," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 2, *1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 684. On "similarity as a primal phenomenon," see Fittler, *'Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit*,' 54–63. The author does not examine connections to ethnology, however.

76 Benjamin, "On Astrology," 2.2: 684.

77 Benjamin, further notes on "Lehre vom Ähnlichen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7: 792.

78 Benjamin, notes on "Lehre vom Ähnlichen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 956.

79 Benjamin, "On Astrology," 2.2: 684.

nity of material," [80] understandable, as Doris Fittler explains, as a proto-"genetic code" causing "relational similarity" in nature: the similarity of all with all rests on a "limited supply of basic elements, features, and qualities. [...] They are simply the variants, mutations, and metamorphoses of one and the same repository." [81] This "community of matter" includes human beings, onto whom mimetic force does not impress itself biologically so much as culturally, when people actively adjust to similarities or rather to processes of becoming similar (*Anähnelung*) perceived as being already at work in their surroundings.[82] They thus possess a "mimetic faculty" encompassing both the abilities to perceive and produce similarities. In distinction to the similarity at work in the "community of material," the similarity emerging from the process of assimilation is not always already given; rather, it is the product of an active capacity for transformation, which, as such, already presumes difference. Considered against the backdrop of the ethnological discourse of the 1920s, this is precisely the difference between the participation that Lévy-Bruhl conceives as always already constituted and the association assumed by English and some German ethnologists to be the basis of 'primitive' thought (see Chapter 2).

According to Fittler, the production of likenesses represents a "response" to the "communication of matter in its magical community,"[83] whose "object and, at the same time, realization" is similarity.[84] Benjamin himself writes, "[t]hese natural correspondences assume decisive importance [...] only in light of the consideration that they are all, fundamentally, stimulants and awakeners of the mimetic faculty which answers them in man."[85] However, whether this can be determined as an "act of communication" [86] is questionable due to the imperative nature of the communication and the compulsory nature of the response. Benjamin speaks, after all, of a "once powerful *compulsion* to become similar and [...] to behave mimetically."[87] The "faculty" appears to be a drive rather than an ability at this juncture. Correspondingly, Benjamin also denies the originality of the human production of similarity: "We must assume in principle that processes in the sky were imitable [...] by people who lived in earlier times; indeed, that this similarity [*Nachahmbarkeit*] contained instructions for mastering

80 Benjamin, further notes on "Lehre vom Ähnlichen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7: 795.
81 Fittler, *'Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit*,' 64 – 65, 61.
82 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 694; cf. Fittler, *'Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit,'* 70 – 76.
83 Benjamin, "Antithetisches über Wort und Name," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7: 795.
84 Fittler, *'Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit*,' 76, 66.
85 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 695.
86 Fittler, *'Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit*,' 77.
87 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 698. Emphasis added.

an already present similarity."[88] Strictly speaking, what is foregrounded here is not the production, but the handling of an already available resemblance. Likewise, when Benjamin observes that human assimilation (the process of dynamic mimesis he calls *Anähnelung*) merely mediates the similarity between things, it is clear that they do not forge new similarities, but are realizing ones that were already present.[89] However, both cases also already imply the inverse tendency. Just as stars and clouds shift in position and shape with each passing moment, the mimetic act may be only momentary, that is, exist precisely in the moment of transformation.[90] The question, then, is how, in the course of its phylogenetic and ontogenetic transformation – the focus of "Doctrine of Similarity" and "On the Mimetic Faculty" – the mimetic faculty shifts from mimetic compulsion to a mimetically-inspired production of the new.

But first let us consider the connections Benjamin traces – in line with the developmental psychologists of his time – between the child and the figure of the "primitive." He generates an abundance of such links, both structural and motif based, in *Berlin Childhood*. [91] The places children seek out, which adults have forgotten, often represent a "wilderness"[92] where one finds tribal sorcerers,[93] masquerades,[94] demons,[95] sacred animals,[96] ghosts and spirits,[97] and goddesses and temples.[98] In the chapter, "Das Karussell" ("The Carousel"), Benja-

88 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 695.

89 Benjamin, notes on "Lehre vom Ähnlichen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 956.

90 Cf. Werner Hamacher, "The Word *Wolke* – If It Is One," in *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State, 1988).

91 Scholem writes, "Benjamin's predilection for the imaginative world of associations [...] was also evident in his marked interest in the writings of insane persons. [...] What primarily fascinated him about them was the architectonic (today one would call it the structural) element of their world systems and the fantastic tables often associated therewith, tables of coordinates that are no longer variable, as they are with children, but are marked by the onset of a grim rigidity. His interest was not pathologic-psychological but metaphysical in nature" (*Walter Benjamin: The Story of A Friendship*, 82). And elsewhere, "The 'world systems' of the mentally deranged [...] provided him with material for the most profound philosophical reflections on [...] the nature of the associations that nourish the thinking and imagination of the mentally sound and unsound alike" (Scholem, "Walter Benjamin," 175).

92 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, *1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2002), 350, 352, 354.

93 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 365, 375.

94 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 375–376.

95 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 365, 375.

96 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 366.

97 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 369, 375, 376, 399.

98 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 366, 375, 403.

min even speaks of a child who travels through the "jungle" surrounded by "natives" and credits him (his younger self) with knowledge of the "eternal return of all things," which brings together the distant past ("thousands of years ago") and recent times ("just now"). [99]

Furthermore, the child displays magical thinking. The boy believes in supernatural beings and practices magical rites; thinking figurally, he revives lexicalized metaphors and back-translates unknown words and names into images. Accordingly, the phrase "waging war" (*Krieg führen*, literally, "leading war") evokes the idea of a man "leading a rhinoceros or a dromedary"[100]; the salutation *gnädige Frau* (an archaic phrase meaning "gracious woman") is taken to refer to his mother's needlework and becomes *Näh-Frau* ("sew-woman"); "Steglitz" – and the aunt who lives in the neighborhood of this name – turns into *Stieglitz*[101] ("goldfinch"); and *Kupferstich* ("copperplate," in the sense of an engraving) becomes *Kopfversteck* ("head-hiding place").[102] The child thinks he possesses the whole in possessing a part (Peacock Island by means of a peacock feather[103]), and he takes similarity as an indication that unrelated things belong together, e. g., the waiting areas for hackneys are provinces of "my back yard" because "the trees were similarly rooted" in both places. The most incidental phenomena are not trivial, but point to connections yet to be discovered (e. g., "everything in the courtyard became a sign [...] to me").[104] The child's animism is also evident. In "Wintermorgen" ("Winter Morning"), "the flame" that "barely had room to move" in the narrow oven "peeps out" at him.[105] In "Schmetterlingsjagd" ("Butterfly Hunt"), "Wind and scents, foliage and sun" "govern the flight of the butterflies."[106] The butterfly is also credited with emotions, in keeping with the exchange of identity that takes place between the animal and the hunter:

> Between us, now, the old law of the hunt took hold: the more I strove to conform, in all the fibers of my being, to the animal – the more butterfly-like I became in my heart and soul – the more this butterfly itself, in everything it did, took on the color of human volition.[107]

99 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 386.
100 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 348.
101 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 358.
102 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 390.
103 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 367.
104 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 345; cf. 356.
105 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 357.
106 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 350.
107 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 351.

In *Berlin Childhood* the repeated transformation of the child into a thing or animal is even more prevalent than such anthropomorphosis. Thus, in "Die Farben" ("Colors"), Benjamin writes, "I took on the colors of the landscape [...]. I traveled in [soap bubbles] through the room"[108]; in "The Mummerehlen," words exert a "compulsion" on the child to make himself "similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes"[109]; and "Verstecke" ("Hiding Places") describes how the child adapts to his surroundings to become first a "ghost," then an "idol," a "door," and finally a "sorcerer."[110] These transformations make it plain that demarcations of identity are not yet clearly drawn for the child. Piaget coined the term "realism" for this state: for the child, subjective phenomena are just as "real" as objective ones; the distinction between the self and the external world is still blurry. *Berlin Childhood* illustrates as much in the fluid boundaries between dream, fantasy, and reality as well as in the intersections between voicing a wish and its fulfillment. These metamorphoses may be seen in light of Lévy-Bruhl and Piaget's notion of participation. The child can transform into its animate or inanimate counterpart for the same reason that wind and sun command the butterfly and that butterflies and flowers communicate with each other: they participate with each other with the help of "spirits" and "demons" whose traces the child gets wind of in "Unordentliches Kind" ("Untidy Child") from *One Way Street*, and which can enter him as in "Butterfly Hunt" and "Hiding Places." In view of Benjamin's terminology, however, it seems most appropriate to attribute the child's acts of assimilation to his "mimetic faculty," with which he reacts to the "mimetic force" at work in things and in himself.[111] This force is the common feature that makes them always already related to one another.

Magical thinking also serves as *Berlin Childhood*'s aesthetic principle, not only on the motivic level but also structurally. In the book, the child's thinking is determined by associations based on similarities or simultaneities. For example, the seaside resort Westerland and Athens turn into colonies of "Blumeshof

108 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 380.

109 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 391.

110 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 375.

111 Thus, as Gérard Raulet has shown, the "pertinent passage" from the "Doctrine of the Similar," in which "the gift of seeing similarity" is determined to be a "weak rudiment of the formerly formidable compulsion to become and behave similarly," reappears "text-identically in a preliminary study of *Berlin Childhood* under the title 'Zur Lampe' and confirms the close connection between the phylogenetic speculations and the ontogenetic reflections on childhood" ("Mimesis. Über anthropologische Motive bei Walter Benjamin – Ansätze zu einer anthropologischen kritischen Theorie," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 64, no. 4 [2016]: 585).

12" when the narrator's grandmother, who lives at this address, sends postcards from those places.[112] Many parts of the work *structurally* follow the same principle. For instance, the section "Zwei Blechkapellen" ("Two Brass Bands") jumps from the description of a stroll down the Lästerallee to an account of diversions on Rousseau Island, an artificial island in a Berlin park.[113] The only connection between the scenes is that brass bands are performing at both locations. The first paragraph of "Tiergarten" ("Zoo"), which quickly moves from the child purposely getting lost in the metropolis to traces of ink left on blotting paper to the zoo, is tied together by a labyrinth motif.

The same applies to the archaic principle of repetition, which Benjamin calls the "great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play." Specifically, "for a child repetition is the soul of play, [...] nothing gives him greater pleasure than to 'Do it again!'"[114] *Berlin Childhood* confirms as much in the endless delight the child experiences when playing with a stocking, fascinated by its metamorphoses. Transferred to the structural level, this means that certain themes repeat without developing in *Berlin Childhood*, circling around the fascination of remembered childhood. It is only logical then that the author had trouble settling on a final sequence of this work's contents (and editors still disagree on what it should be). The principle of repetition is evident in the writing process as well, with Benjamin repeatedly rewriting the various parts of the book – not necessarily by adding new material but revising what was already there.[115] This process corresponds to the principle of 'starting over again' that governs children's games.

In this manner, Benjamin assimilates with the child he is recalling. And as with the child and butterfly, a double transformation takes place: he affirms the child's perspective and, at the same time, the child he recalls becomes an adult insofar as he is always already shaped by his adult self. This intertwining comes out in the narrative perspective, which oscillates between a child-like first-person voice that simply recounts what takes place and an adult first-person voice that comments on it. This is evident, for example, in the use of personifications that translate the child's animism into language. "Blumeshof 12" tells how the old-fashioned furnishings from the 1870s elicit ambivalent feelings, then jumps to the threatening goings-on on the landing and stairs (where an elf or imp [*Alb*] casts a spell on the child) before switching again to declare

112 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 369.
113 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 383–384.
114 Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 2.1: 120.
115 On the composition of *Berlin Childhood*, see Giuriato, *Mikrographien*.

the events to be from a dream. "Winter Morning" omits such retrospective distancing. The flame "was peeping out at me," one reads, but the phenomenon is not explained as a child's (mis)perception.[116] And when, in other parts of *Berlin Childhood*, the first-person voice retreats behind an omniscient narrator and his main character, "the child," this move is by no means accompanied by a distancing from the childlike perspective: "The child who stands behind the doorway curtain *himself* becomes [...] a ghost."[117]

With these rotating perspectives, a distancing from the law of participation is indicated once again. In contrast to the idea of participation, the notion of assimilation assumes that a successful separation has already taken place, so that the focus here is not on an always-already-given participation, but on the becoming similar (*Anähnelung*) of the child to the world of animals and things surrounding him. Also addressed here is the perspective of the one who only *remembers* magical thinking and therefore cannot think of participation as anything other than assimilation.

A Dialectical Turn

However, not only must participation be distinguished from the process of dynamic mimesis Benjamin calls *Anähnelung*; but the child's performance of the latter must also be differentiated from the practice of participation observed by ethnologists. The difference comes out in the concept of play, specifically its distance from compulsion on the one hand and illusion on the other. Benjamin is here concerned with the dialectic turn from mimesis as a sign of powerlessness to mimesis as an instrument of self-empowerment. In many scenes of *Berlin Childhood*, a "magic spell" threatens to strike the child, creating conditions that evoke the pre-animistic age of the ghostly. Ghostly entities appear and threaten the child's autonomy. As in the above-mentioned episode of the *Alp* (imp), they most often surface in dreams (cf. *Alptraum*, Eng. "nightmare"), an indication of their pre-mythic origin.[118] Scholem recalls that in the period when his friend was thinking about the ghostly age, he often spoke of children's dreams in which ghosts carried out their mischief.

In "Über das Grauen" (On Horror, ca. 1920 – 1922), Benjamin ties the appearance of ghosts to "immersion [...] in the alien,"[119] which he understands as a pri-

116 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 357.
117 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 375. Emphasis added.
118 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 354.
119 Benjamin, "Über das Grauen I," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6: 76.

meval expression of the mimetic faculty. In such a state, the human mind is not present to itself any longer; at the same time, the body – the dwelling-place and expression of the mind (or spirit) – is equally empty and functionless.[120] What remains is the bare, mindless body – the "sub-corporeality" (*Unter-Leiblichkeit*) ascribed to the ghostly in the above-mentioned manuscript, "Anthropologie." The ghostly, for Benjamin, is this same "depotentized body" confronting the human being as his uncanny double. By immersing oneself in the other, one becomes/summons ghosts. In this light, 'primitive mimesis' can be seen as having a tendency toward a state of identity; or else, the "ghostly" aspect of the pre-mythical age does not allow demarcations between self and other to emerge in the first place. In contrast, the liberation from ghosts and their kin aims to constitute the self by traversing the other and thereby doing more justice to both. This liberation is what is at stake for the child. Or rather Benjamin portrays the child as always already existing in a state of liberation, with play remaining "always liberating." [121]

This mode of being is particularly pronounced in "Butterfly Hunt." "Powerless" before the interrelations of nature, the child assimilates himself to the butterfly, thus placing his "human existence" at risk.[122] But despite the danger, this procedure is the only way to learn the "laws" of the "foreign language" of nature. The butterfly's behavior will only become predictable to the child through this acquired knowledge, which will thus allow him to capture the insect. The powerlessness stressed at the beginning stands counter to "confidence" at the end: belief in one's own abilities. "Hiding Places" also shows the child's assimilation accompanied by his initial state of powerlessness. The child complies with the compulsion of similarity by camouflaging himself in the "material world." In this case, the process is not willed so much as it occurs through the mediation of a "demon." Accordingly, the narrator recalls his apprehension that he could remain trapped in the metamorphosis: "Whoever discovered me could hold me petrified as an idol under the table, could weave me as a ghost for all time into the curtain, confine me for life within the heavy door."[123] Ultimately, however, the opposite happens. The child initiates a "struggle with the demon," "anticipating its arrival with a cry of self-liberation," and the event is

120 The following takes up Fittler's reading (*'Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit*,' 371–379), but instead of viewing immersion in horror as the "mystically or pathologically heightened synonym of mimetic adaptation" (374), I consider it the primitivistic version of becoming similar (*Anähnelung*).

121 Benjamin, "Old Toys," 2.1: 100.

122 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 360.

123 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 375.

reworked into a process of personal empowerment that the child is "never tired of." The struggle concludes with the transformation of "magical experience" into "science." The boy who has grown so intimate with the apartment by means of assimilating himself to it is soon able to "disenchant" the space as an "engineer."[124]

That for Benjamin mimesis has a dimension of self-empowerment is also shown in his attributing it (in a text on Brecht) not to empathy but to astonishment, conceived since antiquity (as in Greek *thaumazein*) as a spur to the search for knowledge. [125] Hence the assimilative process stands in the service of successfully completing that search and thereby empowering the subject. Its flip side is the hunter's "lust for blood," which leaves "destruction [...] and violence"[126] in its wake. The destruction at work here is incorporating because it is built on mimesis. Its proximity to a "human devouring" destructive pleasure (discussed at the beginning of this chapter) is striking. It is confirmed in a radio speech on "Children's Literature" when Benjamin remarks how books are "deformed and destroyed"[127]; children do not read empathetically so much as they "devour" them. By intensively engaging with what is read, they "increase [themselves]"; the process relates intimately "to their growth and their sense of power."[128]

Playing is thus always already liberation to the extent that assimilation changes from a compulsion born of powerless necessity into a trick played by children in standing up to their environments. Because the child recognized the functionings of this environment through his assimilation of it, he gained power over it and himself by experiencing himself, the cognizant subject, as distinct from what he cognizes. The child savors the pleasure afforded by this victory with each repetition of the game he plays.

As a liberation from a "spell," the mimetic process of making oneself similar to something has an affinity with cunning and ruse; indeed, it can be understood as a strategy of cunning, since it works not through force but by fooling the op-

124 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 375 – 376.

125 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), 11.

126 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 351.

127 Benjamin, "Children's Literature," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1, *1927 – 1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 255.

128 Benjamin, "Children's Literature," 2.1: 256. This concept is superficially similar to that of Robert Müller's man-eating colonizer, personified in the engineer Brandlberger (see chapter 7). However, while Müller's perspective instrumentalizes what has been determined as foreign, Benjamin is concerned precisely with doing away with the determination of such categories.

ponent.[129] In his reflections on the fairy tale, Benjamin repeatedly emphasizes the cunning of the fairy-tale hero as a strategy for overcoming myth – superior even to "divine violence" in "On the Critique of Violence" and to the expiation offered by the tragic hero.

> The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest. [...] The wisest thing – so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day – is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits.[130]

Benjamin attributes this strategy to the child from the start. His interest in fairy tales concerns the "complicity [of nature] with liberated man,"[131] exemplified by the relationship between animals and children in these stories. Accordingly, the essay on Robert Walser credits the fairy tale figures with "childlike nobility,"[132] and the one on Kafka refers to cunning as a "childish [...] means of rescue."[133]

The essay on Kafka also makes it clear why cunning represents the "most prudent" strategy for fighting myth: it is not deployed against the violence that is already in effect in myth, but against its lures, the false promise of redemption from the amorphous, primeval existence. The childish cunning of the fairy-tale hero both resists the enticements of myth and functions as an alternative means for exiting the ghostly realm. Its superiority follows from the fact that its structure is not indebted to mythical violence; this structure draws on pre-mythical mimesis instead of suspending what myth posits or atoning for mythical guilt.[134] Only cunning (and not divine violence or tragic expiation) follows the dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment – a feature to which Benjamin returns again and again in his affirmation of the "liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal."[135]

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129 Cf. Fittler's discussion of cunning in children's games ('*Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit*,' 362–370); Fittler, however, does not identify its function as an alternative to myth or way out from the pre-mythical sphere.

130 Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, *1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 157.

131 Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 3: 157.

132 Walter Benjamin, "Robert Walser," in *Selected Writings*, 2.1: 259.

133 Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in *Selected Writings*, 2.2: 799.

134 Along similar lines, Menninghaus points out that the act of interruption, for Benjamin, does not mean freedom so much as it "suspends the opposition between freedom and fate" ("Walter Benjamins Diskurs der Destruktion," 302).

135 Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 3: 157.

Thinking of emancipative assimilation as cunning does not entail that the undertaking is done in pretense. For this might not at all be the case. Rather, the main feature of this cunning is that children *determine* the assimilation with their ability to independently begin or at least end it. In the process of becoming-similar, they become the *sovereign* recipients of the foreign, and to that extent their assimilation is simultaneously a process of liberation. And only as such – which is to say as release from compulsion – can the process be understood as play. But this means that it can only be understood as play *retroactively:* at the point, that is, when it has exhibited its emancipative quality.

The child's sovereignty finds expression in the way the material of play is handled, which, to use Lévi-Strauss's term, may be described as "bricolage."[136]

> In our own time the "bricoleur" is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if it is extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual "bricolage."[137]

In Benjamin's work, on the other hand, bricolage is attributed to a process of thinking that liberates itself from the spell of myth. The bricolage at work here follows the following formula: "the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa."[138] For the bricoleur does not use his materials in the established sense but reorients past purposes as the means to a new end or sees new ends in past purposes.[139]

Benjamin repeatedly describes the child as a collector of fragments and scraps, assembling a new world of things from what he has collected. Such activity is significant on three registers: First, the world of things turns and "faces"

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136 Giorgio Agamben has made this point in reference to toys (*Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience,* trans. Liz Heron [London: Verso, 1993], 72).

137 Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* 16 – 17.

138 Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* 21.

139 The concept of bricolage has forerunners in the classifications proposed by contemporaries of Benjamin, whose works he knew – for instance, Lev Vygotsky, who observes that children think first in "an *unorganized congeries*, or 'heap'" and then in "complexes" (*Thought and Language* [1936], trans. Alex Kozulin [Cambridge, MA, London: The MIT Press, 1986], 110, 112]. In either case, the child creates new signs that are still too close to concrete *realia* to be concepts but are also more than isolated impressions. William Stern also identifies a principle of children's language in his psychological studies, affirming that "speech-invention" does not arise "from nothing" but uses the linguistic "material" already given (*Psychology of Early Childhood*, 159).

the child.[140] The collector's non-instrumental approach to things enables them to tell their stories and show their potential for transformation. Accordingly, Benjamin speaks of the collector as a "magician"[141] and assigns him to the age of myth in multiple senses, e. g., as subject to the law of fate[142] or (in contrast to the destructive character) as a preserver and guardian.[143] Second, thanks to his access to the "magic" of things, the collector "disenchants"[144] what he gathers through bricolage (that is, the liberating mimesis described above). This is why Benjamin describes children's discoveries as victories: collecting immerses them in the world of objects. In turn, they detach these objects from their contexts and place them in new ones. This amounts, third, to a "renewal of existence."[145] The child has several means to achieve this end; bricolage, as Benjamin writes, is just one of them. First of all the "old world" must be discovered in its magic so that it may be dismembered into fragments, newly assembled, and thereby "renew[ed]." On this score, the point of contact with – but also the difference from – the figure of the barbarian is manifest: such renewal presupposes not only destruction but first and foremost an intimate adaptation to things; it does not aim at restoring identity or even at something entirely novel, but at transformation. This transformed material is defined neither by Benjamin nor the child, but remains variable and non-positing, as both a "creature[] of [...] blissful caprice" [146] and an opposition against being "bound by sense."[147]

What ethnology designates as bricolage could in the (Benjaminian) philosophy of language be called allegory. The bricoleur corresponds to the allegorician in that both "detach[] things from their context" and allow "meaning" to emerge from the inherent "profundity" of those things.[148] The procedure of bricolage is in linked opposition with that of mimesis, with each only being able to unfold its sensibility and productivity by passing through the other. Much in the same way, allegory is contrasted yet paired with the Romantic symbol. The mutual passage of each through the other is captured by Benjamin in the concept of gestural language, which is both motivated by its object and posited by the speaker. In "Pro-

140 Benjamin, *Einbahnstrasse*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4: 93 ("Baustelle"); and "Alte vergessene Kinderbücher," 3: 16.
141 Benjamin, "Lob der Puppe," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3: 217; and "Pariser Passagen I," V: 1027.
142 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 207.
143 Benjamin, notes on "Der destruktive Charakter," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4: 1000.
144 Benjamin, "One-Way Street," 1: 466.
145 Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Selected Writings,* 2.2: 487.
146 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 349
147 Benjamin, "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books," in *Selected Writings,* 1: 435.
148 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 211.

gram for a Proletarian Children's Theater," he describes the gesture as an interlocking of reception and creation and considers the process physiological: "the receptive innervation of the eye muscles [passes] into the creative innervation of the hand. What characterizes every child's gesture is exactly proportioned to receptive innervation."[149] I will return to this point below.

Bricolage accounts for the opposition of sovereign children's play not to compulsion but to illusion. In a footnote to the second version of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin observes that mimesis has two sides, illusion (*Schein*) and play. He understands the "space for play" (*Spiel-Raum*) as a stage for "experimenting procedures."[150] His examples for this stem from film. Within this new medium, actors no longer imitate; their main concern is no longer creating illusion. Rather, their natural behavior is broken into moments that are then reassembled. The director and film technology experiment, as it were, with the material that actors place at their disposal. In this context, children can be understood as directors of their own play material – which includes, potentially, their own metamorphosis – rather than as beings who transform themselves into that material. Benjamin accordingly describes children as directors or "theater producers" of the stories they tell, not as "actors" in them.[151]

This approach produces yet another connection to contemporary developmental psychology, whose representatives tend to explain the child's animism and transformations as associational processes, which is thus related to Benjamin's notion of assimilation (as opposed to participation). At the same time, they must determine how these childhood behaviors relate to illusion. Do children deceive themselves concerning the reality of their productions? Or do they know that simple illusion is at play here? Or do they find themselves somewhere in between, in conscious self-deception? In such discussions, developmental psychologists consistently raise the question of play – as the site where illusion, whatever its status is, can be legitimately engaged in (see Chapters 3 and 5). Now Benjamin's position on this question is that the cultivation of

149 Walter Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1, *1927–1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 204.

150 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Second Version," in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, et al. (Cambridge, MA, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 49, 48.

151 Benjamin, "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books," in *Selected Writings*, 1: 435.

similarities during childhood can *not* be understood in direct relation to the *illusion* of play, but rather to the *sovereignty* children gain over that illusion and to their sovereign handling of the play material.

In distinction to developmental psychologists, Benjamin proposes that a dialectical shift takes place in the child's magical thinking, after which the question of illusion, regardless of whether it has been believed in or not, becomes obsolete. Benjamin's insight is that children's sovereignty is decided only by the question of whether or not they have acted as directors (even of believed-in illusion). If this is the case, play can actually be play, that is, liberation. And as such, it is always located in the sphere of non-illusion. Accordingly, Benjamin stresses that children do not identify with the hero when they read or hear fairy tales. On the contrary, their narcissism – "childish superiority"[152] – stands front and center. For "children are able to manipulate fairy stories [*schaltet mit Märchenstoffen*] with the same ease and lack of inhibition [*so souverän und unbefangen*] that they display with pieces of cloth and building blocks." Instead of immersing themselves in the fairy-tale world, they draw material from it for their own designs: "They build their world out of motifs from the fairy tale."[153] This reconfirms their sovereignty.[154]

The Sovereign Child

Numerous texts show how central the idea of sovereignty is for Benjamin's understanding of the figure of the child and children's play. *Berlin Childhood* describes the child's "power to supervise the game," the animistically transformative "doings of [the] fingers."[155] A bicycle's handlebars, "which seemed to move of [their] own accord," ultimately are mastered, giving the child dominion over the terrain through which he now can travel.[156] In "The Carousel," the child sits "enthroned, as faithful monarch, above a world that belongs to him."[157]

152 Benjamin, "Kolonialpädagogik," 273.
153 Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," 1: 408.
154 With this term I do not refer to the political concept of the *Trauerspiel* book – transcendant sovereignty that has no need for the other. Instead, the sovereign here possesses autonomy and self-determination in an ongoing process of encounter with the other. Cf. Geulen: "The transformation [into a moral and educated subject] is an act of self-empowerment that lacks a preceding subject [...] and cannot be traced to any positing authority" ("Legislating Education," 953).
155 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 364.
156 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 368.
157 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 385.

Benjamin's theory of the sovereign playing child is expanded upon in two lesser known texts. The first is "Grünende Anfangsgründe" (Blossoming Elements, 1931), a review of Tom Seidmann-Freud's play-primers, which Benjamin appreciates for the ample space they grant to the "power of command, which is so decisive for the play of children": "At every point, care has been taken to preserve the sovereignty of the individual at play."[158] Benjamin's attention falls on letting children act on their own initiative in the process of mimetically learning numbers and letters; they are being called on to understand that material as a means to invent stories, "nonsense, mischief and absurdities" – indeed, to undertake barbaric "clearing work."[159] Consequently, letters and numbers do not appear as powerful "idols" eliciting "dread," but as building blocks for sovereign play. The same view is expounded in "Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters" (1929; "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 1999), where Benjamin writes that "the child inhabits his world like a dictator. [...] Almost every childlike gesture is a command and a signal."[160] These signals bring "improvisation" and "variation"[161] to fruition in an anarchistic "carnival."[162] To reiterate, this sovereignty arises not from mere positing, but from a union of sensitive reception and self-confident production, and it opens up play spaces for the productive handling of the given material.

Benjamin's remarks on the "despotism and dehumanized element" of children, with which I began my discussion, must then be understood in terms of the "dictatorial" behavior they use to demonstrate their sovereignty. The behavior is embedded in the dialectical turn from magic to disenchantment, evoked again and again at central points of Benjamin's texts on children and later taken up in his philosophy of history: As a counterpart to the fairy tale's above-cited "liberating magic," Benjamin speaks in "Grünende Anfangsgründe"

158 Benjamin, "Grünende Anfangsgründe," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3: 312.

159 Benjamin, "Grünende Anfangsgründe," 3: 313.

160 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 204. For a thorough discussion of this text and its contexts, see Karin Burk, *Kindertheater als Möglichkeitsraum. Untersuchungen zu Walter Benjamins* "*Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters*" (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2015), which connects to my own reflections (Gess, "Walter Benjamin und 'die Primitiven'"). See also Hans-Thies Lehmann, "Eine unterbrochene Darstellung. Zu Walter Benjamins Idee des Kindertheaters," in *Szenarien von Theater und Wissenschaft*, ed. Christel Weiler and Hans-Thies Lehmann (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2003); the author examines Benjamin's references to commands, signals, dictatorship, gestures, and the "dehumanized" child, identifying "not a communistic so much as an anarchistic conception" at work, reflecting a "Nietzschean" and "Surrealist" sensibility (181).

161 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 204.

162 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 205.

of the child's "enchanting-disenchanting play" (*bezaubernd-entzauberndes Spiel*). [163] In *Berlin Childhood*, the child, as an engineer, "disenchants" the apartment that he has previously mimetically made himself similar to. Finally, as a collecting bricoleur caught in a forest of dreams, the child continuously "disenchants" his spoils.[164]

Throughout, the compulsion to mimetically assimilate things leads to liberation from those things, and mimesis thus becomes sovereignly employed cunning and play (replacing compulsion and illusion). In this process, the child as bricoleur sovereignly disassembles the things that have become intimately familiar to him and puts them together in a new way. The destructive element of play proves constructive insofar as it aims at *analysis* (etymologically, something like "breaking up") that enables new construction. At the same time such destruction is not carried out blindly, but requires great intimacy with the things it dismantles.

In this way, children's play brings together two fundamental principles and gives them a dialectical turn: destruction and mimesis. Initially, Benjamin associates both of them with figures of the foreign and the uncivilized, 'barbarians' and 'primitives' respectively. However, he recognizes that they represent two opposing approaches to the other: elimination of alterity and self-renunciation. The "colonial pedagogy" that he criticizes has forged a false unity between the two approaches, whereby seeming convergence with the other serves only to open a new market, which ultimately leads to the former's extinction. With the principle of sovereignty, Benjamin is aiming at another possibility of mediation, amounting to the dialectical turn by which the two laws interact: in mimesis, the tendency toward liberation is underscored – a liberation containing a destructive moment without, however, being attached to a deposing structure of *Ent-setzung* negatively bound to mythic violence. With cunning, mimesis emancipates itself from compulsion, making the other or the past into material at its disposal. The temporary new construction of bricolage is then simultaneously a transformation of the other into one's own and communication of one's own with the other. It creates and preserves the sovereignty of the one, without thus disregarding the otherness of the other. At the same time it makes clear that the self can only be gained through a descent into the strange and that inversely the strange only constitutes itself in view of the self.

In this light, the child appears as the dialectically turned "primitive." In terms of Benjamin's early anthropological model, the child is the figure who suc-

163 Benjamin, "Grünende Anfangsgründe," 314.
164 Benjamin, "One-Way Street," 1: 466.

ceeds in dialectically elevating the pre-mythic age of the ghostly into the post-mythic age of justice – and this with a circumvention of mythic violence. For even though Benjamin speaks of "despotism" and "dictatorship," he is not referring to the mythic violence of positing, which founds and maintains categories and classes. Instead, the child's despotism emerges from destructive-productive mimesis and results from a cunning, not suspending (*ent-setzend*), form of liberation. To be sure, it also acts destructively in bricolage, but such destruction is grounded in mimetic rapprochement and oriented toward a new non-positing construction. In this way, Benjamin derives an emancipating element from the child's "despotism": an element fundamentally different from the regressive reflections of many of his contemporaries who embraced – and prescribed – 'primitive' violence as a salutary force.

Toward the Child's Language of Gesture

"Imitation may be a magical act; at the same time, however, the imitator also disenchants nature by bringing it closer to language," Benjamin writes, and observes further that this process takes millennia.[165] Over this course of time, language becomes the archive of "nonsensuous similarities,"[166] thus replacing connections between things originally perceived by the senses. In the end, it is no longer nature or humankind, but language that works magic by establishing relations between things and standing in mimetic contact with them.

But how is the phrase "nonsensuous similarity" to be understood? When Benjamin affirms, in "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty," that a similarity exists between language and the writer's intended meaning as well as the writer's unconscious, he is pointing to the double, receptive-productive imprint of language (writing, in this context). In the course of human development, the "mimetic faculty" has made language an "archive of nonsensuous similarities" – not just with what used to exist, but also with images from the unconscious of previous writers. Benjamin calls this the "magical aspect" of language. Such magic is not a matter of conjuring through language so much as its precondition: language, as it relates to the world of objects, is a medium where the objects' "essences" meet.[167] Thus, the focus shifts from the production of language bound to the mimetic faculty to a likewise bound reception of lan-

165 Benjamin, notes on "Lehre vom Ähnlichen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 956.
166 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 697.
167 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 697.

guage: reading, which now attends to the mimetic aspect of language also assumes a "magical"[168] meaning.

Phylogeny repeats itself in the child, who creates language anew. On the other hand, the child is born into a language that already exists. This language has the archival character noted above and at the same time always already communicates a linguistically mediated relation to the objects. Thus, like Groos before him, Benjamin assigns the child an intermediate position between his notion of the 'primitive' as an archaic, indigenous origin and the modern European adult. In contrast to the latter, the child still inhabits a universe of "magical correspondences" and demonstrates the corresponding mimetic faculty. In contrast to the former, these qualities are strongly tied to language,[169] which interposes itself, as it were, between the child and the similarities he recognizes. On the one hand, he discovers the connection among entities through words (e. g., in *Berlin Childhood*, between the aunt and the goldfinch). In this regard, the child is the ideal researcher in the linguistic archive of similarities. On the other hand, language intervenes between the child and the object to which he makes himself similar. Accordingly, Benjamin describes his transformation into a butterfly as mastering the rules of a foreign language.[170] Here, the focus does not bear on the similarity between the thing and its name so much as on the similiarity between subject and object, which is achieved with the help of the appropriation of a foreign language.

Ultimately, however, the subject (the "translator"), not the object, finds expression in this language. Benjamin's discussion of verbal misunderstanding makes as much clear: the child hears an unknown word, assimilates its sound to familiar words, and creates a new meaning by assimilating himself to it. *Kupferstich* (copperplate) becomes *Kopfversteck* (head-hiding place) when the child sticks his head out from under the chair. The separation, not correspondence, between an object and its name is the precondition for this event.[171] By the same token, the process no longer depends on a correspondence between subject and object, but on the child's correspondence with a word that only has a referent in this very correspondence. In this way, words become masks – "mummery" – that the child puts on (as *Mummerehlen*,[172] a word produced by misunderstanding, suggests). But at the same time, the child, or rather the process of

168 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 698.

169 See Anja Lemke, *Gedächtnisräume des Selbst. Walter Benjamins 'Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert'* (Würzburg: Königshausen + Neumann, 2008), 64.

170 Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 3: 351.

171 Cf. Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 2.2: 697.

172 See Giuriato, *Mikrographien*, 188 – 190.

his receptive-productive appropriation of words, is expressed in these masks. In contrast to the modern adult, the child not only reads in the archive of similarities, but also brings forth new words and new similarities.

Scholars have already discussed in detail how the Benjaminian child employs language mimetically. Yet, less attention has been paid to the gestural aspect of that language, which is indispensable to children's mimetic use of language. In "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," Benjamin writes,

> For the true observer [...] every childhood action and gesture becomes a signal. Not so much a signal of the unconscious [...] (as the psychologists like to think), but a signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands. [...] The child inhabits his world like a dictator. For this reason, the "theory of signals" is no mere figure of speech. Almost every childlike gesture is a command and a signal in a world which only a few unusually perceptive men [...] have glimpsed.[173]

In this passage and others like it attending to signals, commands, and orders, a language seems to be called upon that is completely unlike the language of nonsensuous similarities. Such language is deictic, that is, it performs a demonstrative pointing-out that defines a situation or constitutes it in the first place, as opposed to mimetic reference to an object or the mimetic expression of a speaker.

The nature of deixis can be elucidated in the same way that "nonsensuous similarity" was above: with the gesture that Benjamin declares essential to children's signaling activity.[174] My thesis is that the seemingly opposing ideas of a mimetic and a deictic language come together in the concept of a language of gestures, which forms a centerpiece of Benjamin's later theory of language as a whole.[175] Benjamin develops the concept in reference to the figure of the child because for him childhood repeats the early stages of human evolution and linguistic development.[176]

Benjamin's writings on children do not provide the focus for the following, however; and neither do his discussions of Brecht and Kafka, which are usually

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173 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 203 – 204.

174 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 203 – 204.

175 I consider this more substantial than the definition of gesture proposed by Carrie Asman ("Die Rückbindung des Zeichens an den Körper. Benjamins Begriff der Geste in der Vermittlung von Brecht und Kafka," *The Other Brecht II. The Brecht-Yearbook* 18 [1993]: 107, 115), who stresses the oscillation between its mimetic and semiotic dimensions – a quality displayed by language in general for Benjamin.

176 Like many of his contemporaries, Benjamin follows Ernst Haeckel's claim that ontogeny repeats phylogeny. However, he departs from the model when he identifies differences between the ways early humankind and children understand the relationship between language and the world.

enlisted to shed light on his theory of gesture. Instead, attention will be given to "Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview," an essay that has received relatively little scholarly notice,[177] even though Benjamin deemed it a belated forerunner to "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty."[178] Despite its title, this text is much more than a work commissioned by the Institute for Social Research. It presents Benjamin's own philosophy of language and, as such, should certainly be classified among his texts on language theory. Yet, in contrast to the latter, this essay enables a more nuanced categorization of the author's reflections in the context of linguistic anthropology.[179] A detailed comparison between "Problems in the Sociology of Language" and the texts it references will make it possible to elaborate Benjamin's theory of gesture in such a way that expands (and, in some points, corrects) the prevailing view of it among scholars.

A Theory of Gestures in the "Problems in the Sociology of Language"

Descriptive Vocal Gestures

By the author's own account, "Problems in the Sociology of Language" leads up to where "Doctrine of the Similar" begins. The text revolves around the "origin of language itself."[180] Benjamin begins by noting the "stimulating effect" of "variants of onomatopoeic theory" proposed by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Ernst Cassirer. For Benjamin, these variants lie in the understanding of onomatopoeia as a "descriptive vocal gesture." Accordingly, Benjamin refers to Lévy-Bruhl's talk

177 One of the few studies to examine this text in detail is by Günter Karl Pressler, *Vom mimetischen Ursprung der Sprache. Walter Benjamins Sammelreferat Probleme der Sprachsoziologie im Kontext seiner Sprachtheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992). See also Anja Lemke, "Zur späteren Sprachphilosophie," in *Benjamin-Handbuch*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006).

178 Benjamin to Werner Kraft, 30 January 1936, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jabobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 521.

179 Benjamin himself points out that it is not enough to enlist sociology; child psychology, depth psychology, ethnology, and psychopathology must also be consulted when pursuing "the question of the origin of language" ("Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview," in *Selected Writings* 3: 68).

180 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 69.

of the "graphic character"[181] of language and claims that language's origins lie in the "language of the hand."[182]

Indeed, Lévy-Bruhl never indicates that language emerges from onomatopoeia but rather from gestures reproducing the behaviors/manners of their objects.[183] As he writes, "[i]f verbal language, therefore, describes and delineates in detail positions, motions, distances, forms, and contours, it is because the language of gestures uses exactly the same means of expression."[184] This results in the "pictorial concepts"[185] that Benjamin cites, which, instead of generalizing, are suited to particularities and therefore innumerable. Significantly, Benjamin contends that such linguistic depiction explains "the magical use of words"[186] for Lévy-Bruhl. This claim is based on an incomplete reading, however, inasmuch as for Lévy-Bruhl language's pictoriality is related to but not responsible for its magic. Instead, the magic of language derives from the mystical participation at work in established, handed-down initiation rites.[187]

Benjamin's slanted reading practice is even more pronounced in his reading of Cassirer, whose remarks on mythical thinking and its relation to language are not as similar to Lévy-Bruhl's as Benjamin makes out. Benjamin describes Lévy-Bruhl's "pictorial concepts" as having a "concreteness," but this does not correspond to the "concentration and compression"[188] that Cassirer ascribes to mythical concepts and "primitive linguistic concepts."[189] Cassirer's interest bears on the moment of "self-predication,"[190] when the sacred detaches from the profane and the mythical/linguistic concept emerges. This is identified with the object not on the basis of gestural depiction, as the connection to Lévy-Bruhl suggests. Instead it derives from the spontaneous expression of affect in sound; word and phenomenon merge due to the violence the latter exerts on the experiencing subject.[191] This process, not any form of likeness, provides the basis for Cassirer's

181 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 70.
182 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 73. Cf. "Reflections on Humboldt," where, against Humboldt's claim that the word is "the most important component of language," Benjamin suggests comparing "the word to the index finger on the hand of language" (in *Selected Writings*, 1: 424).
183 Cf. Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, 136–152.
184 Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, 140, translation slightly modified.
185 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 71.
186 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 73.
187 Lévy-Bruhl quoted in Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 71.
188 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 71.
189 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 70.
190 Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 77.
191 Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 58.

magical equation of word and thing. Benjamin suggests otherwise when he declares that Cassirer considers the "linguistic magic of the primitives" to be rooted in "complexes" that are supposed to correspond to Lévy-Bruhl's "pictorial concepts."[192]

From Benjamin's treatment of Lévy-Bruhl and Cassirer's writings, therefore, one can draw two conclusions: First, Benjamin overestimates both authors' interest in linguistic magic. Second, there is a skewed, in the case of Lévy-Bruhl, and, in the case of Cassirer, false attribution of linguistic magic to the pictoriality (*Abbildlichkeit*) of language.

Physio-logic and Expressive Movement

In his readings of various linguistic anthropologists, Benjamin shows a particular interest in the premise of an original language of gesture. As I have noted, his starting point for this is the work of Lévy-Bruhl, whom he defends against critics by invoking the "simpler and more sober considerations" of the Russian linguist and ethnographer Nikolai Marr that "primeval man, who did not possess any articulated language, was happy if he could point to or draw attention to an object, and to do this he had a particularly well-adapted tool, the hand."[193]

Contrary to Benjamin's suggestion, however, Marr does not assume that this deictic language of hand gesture is the basis of spoken language. On the contrary, for him the raw material of spoken language, natural animal sounds, exists in parallel to gestural language, and the prerequisite for the formation of spoken language is ultimately represented by the use of tools. For, as he sees it, precisely such a "tool refined by special art" is at work in articulated language.[194] Benjamin's reading obscures (if not eliminates) this difference. He also claims that, according to Marr, the use of tools "liberated the *hand* for the tasks of language."[195]

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192 The quotation that Benjamin appends makes it clear that he means that the "complex" advanced by Karl Theodor Preuss is the precondition for magical thinking. However, Preuss's "complex" cannot be equated with Lévy-Bruhl's "mystical" intuition or Cassirer's "predication" as easily as Benjamin claims. Lévy-Bruhl posits *participation*, whereas Preuss has an undifferentiated state in mind. Evidently, Benjamin still conflates participation as identity at this point (cf. "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 73). Cassirer enlists Preuss only to show that mythical thinking must first undergo "the process of separation and liberation" (Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 97–98) on the level of the individual (this is "self-predication").

193 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 73–74.

194 Nikolaus Marr, "Über die Entstehung der Sprache," *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus* 1, no. 3 (1926): 558–599, here: 593.

195 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 81. Emphasis added.

Yet Marr's point is precisely the opposite: that the mouth could now take over the essential tasks of language.[196]

Likewise, Benjamin takes up the deictic function of language as described by the developmental psychologist and linguistic theorist Karl Bühler, who illustrates that function with repeated references to the pointing gesture of the index finger.[197] Wrested from context, the passages Benjamin quotes in "Problems of the Sociology of Language" seem to support his claims that nouns emerged from demonstratives. For example, he quotes Bühler as follows:

> Within the broad development of human language, we can imagine that single-class systems of deictic utterances were the first stage. But then came the need to include what was absent, and that meant severing the direct link of utterance to situation [...]. The liberation of linguistic expression from the field of showing – from the *demonstratio ad oculos* – had begun.[198]

In fact, Bühler held the exact opposite view: "deictic words and naming words are two different word classes that must be clearly separated; there is no justification for assuming that [...] the one emerged from the other." He argues *against* the "myth of the deictic source of representative language."[199] Benjamin's tendentious readings of Lévy-Bruhl, Marr, and Bühler imply that he subscribed to the very myth Bühler wished to refute (and in so doing departed from the notion of language originating in imitative depictions): that naming was originally a matter of pointing-and-showing.

Nonetheless, that conclusion must also be modified. For Benjamin advances his thesis that language originated in gesture to a different end. Accordingly, he voices enthusiasm about the arguments made by Richard Paget, who "understands [language] as gesticulation of the speech organs." This definition is not as "surprising"[200] as Benjamin thinks since it was common at the time to trace articulated language back to gestures performed by the body and/or the mouth.[201] In contrast to scholars working in the Cratylist tradition, conceiving the relation-

196 Marr, "Über die Entstehung der Sprache," 592–593.

197 Bühler, *Theory of Language*, 94–95, 100, 112.

198 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 79; and Bühler, *Theory of Language*, 418.

199 Bühler, *Theory of Language*, 101.

200 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 83.

201 Pethes points out the connection to "oral gesture" developed by Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human* ("Die Transgression der Codierung," in *Gestik. Figuren des Körpers in Text und Bild*, ed. Margreth Egidi, Oliver Schneider, and Matthias Schöning [Tübingen: Narr, 2000], 303).

ship between vocal gestures and objects in terms of imitation (e. g., Clara and William Stern[202]), Paget focuses on physiology:

> If the mouth, tongue and lips be moved as in eating, this constitutes a gesture sign meaning "eat"; if, while making this sign, we blow air through the vocal cavities, we automatically produce the whispered sounds mnyam-mnyam (mnyum), or mnia-mnia (mnya) – words which probably would be almost universally understood, and which actually occur as a children's word for food in Russian, as well as in English. Similarly, the action of sucking liquid in small quantities into the mouth, if "blown" as before, produces the whispered words sip, sap, according to the exact position of the tip of the tongue behind the lower teeth.[203]

From this, Benjamin extracts that the "gesture" of slurping up liquid brought forth the word "soup" and that the inaudible "gesture" of smiling produced the utterance of "ha ha."[204]

Enlisting Paget for his own purposes, Benjamin understands these gestures (slurping, smiling) as "expressive movements" (*Ausdrucksbewegungen*)[205] along the lines proposed by Wilhelm Wundt, who explains gesture physiologically as the involuntary discharge of an inner tension. For Wundt, the movements at issue externalize an inner state and serve as a declaration (*Kundgabe*)[206] of emotion or to communicate wishes.[207] The same can be argued of Paget: the gesture of smiling serves to express emotion and that of slurping soup signifies the fulfillment of a wish insofar as it exerts influence first in a palpable way on the object and later in the form of an appeal (soup!) on the listener. Semiotically speaking, both are indexical signs, connected to the referent not by a similarity available to the senses, but by physiologically motivated contiguity. Both therefore have indicative (not imitative) characters.

Theories of language's gestural origins appealed to Benjamin in part because they offered an alternative to the narrow conception of mimesis in onomatopoeic theory, which could be "called a mimetic theory in the narrower sense, [...] supplemented by a mimetic theory in a far wider sense."[208] The physiological correspondences between the referent, oral gesture, and speech sound avoid the

202 Stern and Stern, *Die Kindersprache*, 355 – 357.

203 Richard Paget, *Human Speech: Some Observations, Experiments, and Conclusions as to the Nature, Origin, Purpose and Possible Improvement of Human Speech* (London: Kegan, 1930), 136 – 137.

204 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 84.

205 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 73.

206 Wundt, *Elements of Folk Psychology,* 58.

207 Wundt, *Elements of Folk Psychology,* 90 – 91.

208 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 84.

issue of oral imitation without lapsing into arbitrariness, offering an indexical model of the sign. In this way, Benjamin found confirmation that nonsensuous similarities are in effect between the referent and the sounds of speech, as proposed in "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty."

Moreover, the idea of expressive movement enabled him to understand physiologically motivated gestures as a form of declaration (*Kundgabe*). At the same time, he was able to stabilize his concept of a nonsensuous similarity between the speaker and speech sounds. This feature is most evident perhaps in the way children assimilate to the words they themselves have made up in the process of misunderstanding – as illustrated by the example of "copperplate" becoming "head hiding-place" discussed above. To be recalled as well are the images of the unconscious archived in handwriting that are discussed in "On the Mimetic Faculty" and the "way of meaning" introduced in "The Task of the Translator."[209] In all of these cases, emphasis is laid on how the speaker or writer *themselves*, not their signified meanings, enter into language.[210]

Gestural Language as Motivated Positing

Benjamin lauds Heinz Werner for presenting the "most advanced"[211] of the theories he surveys and also voices appreciation for Rudolf Leonhard's work. Both authors focus not on the enunciation of the subject, but on that of the object and simultaneously on the expression of language itself. To that end, they develop an understanding of language as motivated positing that becomes important for Benjamin's theory.

Werner's *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik* (Foundational Questions of Linguistic Physiognomy, 1932), like Benjamin's "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," starts from the hypothesis that everything human beings encounter communicates an expression to them. Indeed, Werner holds that language itself – as an "objective, particular world of objects"[212] – possesses this ex-

209 Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, *1913 – 1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 257.

210 See Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, e. g., "Nevertheless, the more significant and, indeed, sounder aspect of Benjamin's theory of mimesis in language and writing lies in his reflection on [...] larger linguistic figures [...], which do not concern the relationship of language and writing to 'meaning'[...] so much as 'naming' (on the part of the 'speaker' or 'writer')" (66).

211 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 85.

212 Heinz Werner, *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik* (Leipzig: Barth, 1932), 10.

pressive dimension, too. His monograph is shaped by the paradoxical task of ascribing to language an inherent expressiveness *of its own* and, at the same time, allowing such expression to coincide again and again with what it designates. He cites the example of an experimental subject referring to the word "wood" (*Holz*) as "something coarse, rough, crude. One gets stuck on it when one sweeps one's eyes over it."[213]

Werner justifies his approach by emphasizing that "all language in the sphere of expression has an image-relationship [*Bildbeziehung*] to reality," but at the same time he rejects the claim that expressive language depicts things.[214] The expression of language he is pursuing is not an attribute based on referential convention or imitation of its object. To counter such views, Werner appeals to language's "ideality." [215] Invoking Plato's *Cratylus*, he stresses the "moment of reconfiguring" performed by the "linguistic creator," who neither enlists arbitrary sounds to designate things nor makes an acoustic copy of them. Instead – as asserted by Johann Gottfried Herder more than a century earlier – the speaker chooses sounds that are motivated by his particular perspective on the objects he is naming: "This sonic material, which the creator of language forms, is not an imprint of reality, but a tool with which the characters of things are designated, aspects of the essence of things are brought out."[216]

For Werner, the representational function of language serves its declarative function: "[The speaker] does not want to produce the things themselves, but to declare something about things," which, at the same time, is a declaration of his own point of view on them. Such a perspective is not arbitrary, but a motivated *Setzung* or positing. Language communicates information not only about the speaker's subjectivity but also about the nature of the object spoken of, its "essential aspects" (albeit from a specific and personal standpoint). In this context, "expression" does not refer to the usual declarative function of language so much as to its secondary, representational function. Werner is not concerned with the speaker or with the speaker's declaration of his or her inner state; instead, he focuses on how language gives shape to an actual "aspect of [the thing's] being."[217] This ontological feature of the object is tied to its existence in language, but it is thought of not as an invention so much as a *discovery*. In this light, what language proclaims is something authentically linguistic

213 Werner, *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik*, 35.
214 Werner, *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik*, 12; cf. 44.
215 Werner, *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik*, 44.
216 Werner, *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik*, 15.
217 Werner, *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik*, 15.

and, at the same time, a feature belonging to the thing itself. Werner's claim is that language as an "objective, special world of its own" does not express the subjectivity of the speaker; rather, it expresses itself as a form of knowledge as well as the object's essence.[218]

Leonhard also sets out to solve the riddle of language's expressive dimension, and in doing so he abstracts, even more than Werner, from the speech situation and investigates language as a "phenomenon *sui generis* with an existence according to its own laws."[219] Yet in the process he scarcely attends to how objects motivate words. Instead, his interest is directed to the physiognomic associations that words elicit – whether or not these associations coincide with the object signified (most of his examples involve cases where they do). He shows, again even more forcefully than Werner, the "constitutive" dimension of language: "The word constitutes not only itself, but also [...] the idea, the idea precisely assigned to reality."[220]

Both theories interest Benjamin because they approach an aspect of language's origins in gesture that his own theory is trying to elaborate as well. However, Werner and Leonhard are not concerned with likenesses or the physiological relationship between words and things. They are interested in an expression of language *as such*, which is also an expression of the essence of things. As Leonhard's text exhibits, these considerations ultimately lead to an insight into language as symbolic form. Only in and as language can the things of the world be known. Their relationship is *inversely* motivated, then, insofar as language posits their existence in the first place.

Leonhard also calls the constitutive power of language its "magic."[221] Bühler does the same and understands positing language as a magical appeal to objects to take shape in conformity with language. In a passage quoted by Benjamin, he writes, "[n]aming the things by their 'true' name becomes a powerful (a benign or baleful) means for the speaker to appeal to the world of things itself."[222] Here naming and appealing merge in relation to the world of things. Bühler observes such a behavior in children as well: "under the influence of high affective tension [...] the world is transmuted before the eyes of the child much as the theo-

218 The proximity to the considerations in Benjamin's early language essay ("On Language as Such") is obvious here. What is theologically justified in Benjamin's work, however, tends to amount to epistemological optimism in Werner's.

219 Rudolf Leonhard, *Das Wort* (Berlin: Graetz, 1932), 5.

220 Leonhard, *Das Wort*, 5.

221 Leonhard, *Das Wort*, 5.

222 Bühler, *Theory of Language,* 244.

rists of the magical attitude of mind think." At the same time, however, Bühler notes another attitude at work, namely,

> [t]he completely unmagical *experimental attitude* of the child, by virtue of which the newcomer in this life matures gradually, in step with the successful results of his struggles when he "encounters resistant matter" [...], maturing to become a master of the techniques required by life. The child has no trouble switching from one attitude to the other, and, for example, quite tranquilly puts the piece of wood that a moment before "was" a sobbing and pacified foster-child into the stove. It is not by any stretch of the imagination the foster-child that then burns before its eyes, but the common piece of wood.[223]

Both considerations resurface in Benjamin's work. Passages on the child's perception of the magic of the name occur throughout *Berlin Childhood*, as I have already remarked (*Steglitz* and *Stieglitz, gnädige Frau* and *Näh-Frau*, and so on). Similarly, the experimental bearing that Bühler discusses corresponds, in "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," to "improvisation [...] [which] is the framework from which the signals, the signifying gestures, emerge."[224] But unlike Bühler, Benjamin does not oppose the magical stance to an experimental one free of magic. Instead, he sees the two as dialectically mediated by gesture. Gesture is at once both magic and liberation from magic.

Benjamin ends his overview with a lengthy excerpt from a study on aphasia by Kurt Goldstein, who takes issue with the instrumental conception of language. For him, language is instead a "manifestation, a revelation of our innermost being and of the psychic bond linking us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings."[225] With this conclusion, Benjamin underscores once again the relational character of linguistic positing, insofar as the speaker and situation of his or her speech return to the forefront. At such moments, language is no longer thought of as the positing of something. Instead positing language is thought of as the innermost essence of humanity and human community.

This finding corresponds to hints, in "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty," regarding what or whom language might resemble. But in contrast to Werner and Leonhard, Benjamin makes virtually no effort to elaborate. He has no interest in interpreting the images glimpsed in handwriting, for in-

223 Bühler, *Theory of Language*, 245.

224 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 204.

225 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 86. Kurt Goldstein, "L'analyse de l'aphasie et l'étude de l'essence du langage," in Ernst Cassirer, Leo Jordan, Henri Delacroix et al., *Psychologie du langage* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1933).

stance, even in texts concerned with graphology.[226] Instead it is merely noted that they *are* visible. *That* the nonsensuous similarity exists is more important than *what* it means. The images refer primarily to their own existence *as* images instead of to whatever they may depict.

In this sense, Giorgio Agamben has called gesture a "communication of a communicability": "It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality."[227] For Benjamin, Agamben continues, this notion entertains a relationship with the "expressionless" (a point of difference with Werner) and therefore with the process of "showing": "Gesture is what remains expressionless in every expression. In this sense the gesture may be essentially deictic."[228] This distinction, between language as the positing *of* something and positing language *as such* as the innermost essence of humanity, should be viewed in light of Benjamin's earlier distinction between expression *through* and *in* language. It is not with the aid of language so much as *in* language that human nature, individual and collective, comes out. This is not the case because language can be traced back to God (as Benjamin affirms in his earlier essay, "On Language as Such"), but because, as his reference to Marr makes clear, linguistic positing is a manmade tool for disclosing a world that is historically and sociologically constituted.

Creative Innervation of the Hand

In discussions of the motivated nature of language, the physiological perspective and the theory of positing tend to be set in opposition. The former holds that a physiologically motivated connection between language and its objects is at work in indexical expressive movements. The latter holds that the link between language and its objects is posited, that is, positing language outlines the con-

226 Benjamin, "Der Mensch in der Handschrift" and "Zur Graphologie" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3: 137 and 6: 185, respectively.

227 Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means Without End*, trans. Vicenzo Binetti and Cesare Catarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 58.

228 This passage is not found in the English translation cited in footnote 227 and has been translated by Susan Solomon from the German edition: Giorgio Agamben, "Noten zur Geste," *Postmoderne und Politik*, ed. Jutta Georg-Lauer (Tübingen: edition discord, 1992), 105 – 106. Werner Hamacher also interprets gesture in Benjamin along these lines, pointing to the caesura constuted in the process: "The decision, a pure caesura in the language of predications, laying-bare what simply says without saying *something*, lies in what Benjamin calls gesture" ("Die Geste im Namen. Benjamin und Kafka," in *Entferntes Verstehen. Studien zu Philosophie und Literatur von Kant bis Celan* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998], 318).

tours of the object in the first place. Benjamin elaborates a model in which the two perspectives are mediated through one another.

The final pages of "Problems of the Sociology of Language" include a quote in which Mallarmé calls a dancer a "metaphor" that "may give expression to one aspect of the elementary forms of our existence: sword, goblet, flower, and others."[229] In this context, dance is not an expressive movement in the sense of a declaration of affect or desire, but rather of the "expression" of something external. And Benjamin must be using "expression" deliberately here, because the French original speaks of "a *metaphor summarizing* one of the elementary aspects of our form" (une *métaphore résumant* un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme).[230]

What is one to make of this disparity? A passage from "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" is instructive. Here, Benjamin emphasizes that the gestural signals of the child are to be "applied to materials." In this context, Benjamin follows art historian Konrad Fiedler in understanding gesture as a "seeing with the hand" and as a physiological process, whereby "the receptive innervation of the eye muscles [is transferred] into the creative innervation of the hand. What characterizes every child's gesture is that creative innervation is exactly proportioned to receptive innervation."[231] "Innervation" is a physiological term that refers both to the neurological disposition of an organ and the process by which stimuli reach it. For example, Freud writes,

> all our psychical activity starts from stimuli (whether internal or external) and ends in innervations. Accordingly, we shall ascribe a sensory and a motor end to the [psychic] apparatus. At the sensory end there lies a system which receives perceptions; at the motor end there lies another, which opens the gateway to motor activity.[232]

At the same time, Benjamin distinguishes between "receptive" and "creative" innervation. This reflects his thoughts on the development of the mimetic faculty

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229 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 84.

230 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Ballets," trans. Evlyn Gould, *Performing Arts Journal* 15, no. 1 (1993): 107. Emphasis added.

231 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 204.

232 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 539. On Benjamin's use of the term *innervation*, cf. Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Hansen devotes more attention to Freud and stresses that Benjamin views innervation as a "two-way process, that is, not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form but also the possibility of reconverting, and recovering, split-off psychic energy through motoric stimulation" (50).

from gaze to bodily gesture and finally to articulation, which he formulates in a draft on the mimetic faculty and which, against this background, can be understood as a development from receiving to creating, from reception to production.[233] Even more importantly, Benjamin's above quoted passage on innervation corrects the common understanding of signals. The gestural signal does not apply to objects from without, and therefore it is neither arbitrary nor simply instrumentalized by the subject. Instead it develops out of them, so to speak. It receives, imitates, and reshapes in one process.

The same holds for the dancer mentioned above. Like the child's gesture, Benjamin understands dance as a transfer of visual perception into bodily gesture. Its way of bringing objects into expression is first based on the physio-logic of innervation and then on the transfer of neurological stimuli from one organ to another. In this process, innervation is motivated at least as much by the received object as it is by the creative subject. In other words, dance does not appear only as the reference to an object, but as the object's producer. At the same time, it expresses the creative innervation of the subject that is constituted in the process.[234] Indexical mimesis and positing deixis are mediated through one another in a dance-like gestural language.[235]

Benjamin's notes on "Doctrine of the Similar" make clear that his model of the "creative innervation of the hand" goes hand in hand with the paradoxical idea of a simultaneous liquidation and establishment of magic. On the one hand, the relocation of the mimetic faculty from the eye through the body to the lips implies the "overcoming of myth," that is, the overcoming of magical compul-

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233 Benjamin, Notes on "Zum mimetischen Vermögen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 958.

234 At no point does Agamben examine Benjamin's discussion of dance. However, he offers his own thoughts on dance in keeping with the quality described: "If dance is gesture, it is so [...] because it is nothing more than the endurance of and the exhibition of the media character of corporal movements. *The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality; it is the process of making a means visible as such*" ("Notes on Gesture," 58). Likewise, Agamben invokes Mallarmé to make his point, albeit from different passages – for instance, "The body takes possession of itself again and again: its dance is the analysis, the sequencing of all of the tendencies toward movement that it discovers in itself" ("Noten zur Geste," 107). As above, this passage is not found in the English translation cited in footnote 227 and has been translated by Susan Solomon from the German edition just cited. The "expression" of an external element is missing here; the focus is instead self-referential showing. The interpretation I have proposed combines both perspectives.

235 This view contradicts the one proposed by Jürgen Habermas ("Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique [1972]," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983]), who disregards the deictic component of Benjamin's theory of language. Cf. Anja Lemke ("Zur späteren Sprachphilosophie," 652).

sion. Obviously, the dialectical turn of the mimetic faculty from a compulsive to a sovereign behavior, used with cunning, is here linked to the transformation from being spellbound by the object to determining the object, i. e., from being looked at to bodily and lip gestures to spoken language. On the other hand, he argues that the dancer's "mimetic mode of behavior" stands in a dialectical relationship with the "dynamic side" of dance, namely, the magical "transfer of energy" to its respective objects.[236] In other words, Benjamin claims that the formation of the world of things (by means of the magical transfer of energy) takes place in the gestures of dance, which are at the same time mimetically derived from that same world of things. Here, in contrast to the passage above, "magic" serves creative production, not the compulsion to become similar.

"On the Mimetic Faculty" and "Doctrine of the Similar" allow for the same finding. In the first essay, Benjamin writes that with the transfer of the mimetic faculty to language, magic has been "liquidated." But in "Doctrine of the Similar" he calls the mimetic aspect of language as well as the reading of it "magical." Clearly, then, two different notions of magic are at work, or, more likely, a dialectical turn of magic is in evidence. [237] Magic is overcome insofar as people are no longer bound in a compulsive relationship to similarity. Instead, they come out of reception into production and from assimilation to the creation of something new but similar, through which they acquire a fleeting sovereignty. The gesture remains "magical"; however, it is just as motivated by the object as it is (physiologically) by the subject, especially insofar as it has the force of symbolic formation at its disposal.

In light of the quotation from Mallarmé, the model of the "creative innervation of the hand" can be related to Benjamin's theories on the nonsensuous similarity of writing, in which the gestures of the hand have left their traces behind. Indeed, Mallarmé goes on to say (although Benjamin does not quote the passage) that the dancer does not dance, but writes:

> *She does not dance,* suggesting, by way of prodigious abbreviations and expansions, with a corporal writing that would necessitate paragraphs of dramatic dialogue as well as prosaic description, to be expressed, in the rewriting: poem disengaged from all of the scribe's apparatus.[238]

Indeed, given Mallarmé's reference to "metaphor," the "creative innervation of the hand" may also be grasped in semiotic terms as an interactionist "meta-

236 Benjamin, notes on "Zum mimetischen Vermögen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 957.
237 Cf. Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, 75–77.
238 Mallarmé, "Ballets," 107.

phor," which gives expression to what is taken from the world, while at the same time transforming it and making it the material for one's own new production. A note Benjamin made (12 October 1928) when writing this essay confirms as much: "Upon close inspection, the metaphor ultimately becomes the only possible manifestation of the thing. The path to reach it: impassioned play with things. On that same path children reach the heart."[239]

Defining "creative innervation of the hand" as a metaphor points to a middle ground between the conflicting interpretations of Benjamin's theory of gesture: One, the allegorical interpretation, understands gesture as pure positing.[240] The other is bound to the model of the Romantic symbol and sees in gesture a possible remnant of immediate or at least motivated language.[241] The physiological conception of expressive motion and the notion of language as positing come together in the idea of language/writing as metaphor, i. e., as transference, which resonates with Benjamin's early model of "translation" in "On Language as Such." There he writes, "For conception and spontaneity together, which are found in this unique union only in the linguistic realm, language has its own

239 Benjamin, "Verstreute Notizen. 12. Oktober 1928," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6: 417. The quotation is taken from a discussion with Bloch and Rethel about how things point to the social relations they are a part of, i. e., the way in which they are, as it were, metaphors for the social. Thus, the perspective on language as a product and expression of human community, already mentioned and to be discussed in more detail below, is echoed here.

240 Pethes connects the gesture with allegorical emblems: "The essential quality of gesture is that its meaning vacillates, which [...] occurs in allegorical emblems: the gesture is material that only takes on meaning when it [...] is inscribed. This deferral of meaning makes physical bearing in Kafka's works into the self-referential model of representation in the figurative sense of 'gesture': 'gestural texts' expose the staged character of the meaning they offer" (Pethes, *Mnemographie*, 119). Rainer Nägele also considers the gesture to have the structure of an emblem and reads it as the caesura and dismemberment of bodily wholeness ("Von der Ästhetik zur Poetik der Zäsur," in *Lesarten der Moderne. Essays* [Eggingen: Isele, 1998], 110 – 120).

241 This concerns, e. g., Habermas's reading of gesture as immediate expression. However, the deconstructive interpretations of Agamben and Hamacher, who understand gesture as the showing of showing, could also be placed here inasmuch as they assume that the problems of difference between sign and referent have been suspended by the sign's self-referentiality. Cornelia Zumbusch identifies a middle ground in Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image, which she traces back to the "true symbol" invoked in the author's early works (*Wissenschaft in Bildern. Symbol und dialektisches Bild in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne-Atlas und Walter Benjamins Passagen-Werk* [Berlin: Akademie, 2004], 14). This conception agrees with that proposed by Aby Warburg: "With the symbol and dialectical image, Warburg and Benjamin aim for a third form between the magical symbol and the purely arbitrary sign. Warburg's symbol and Benjamin's dialectical image [...] bridge the common distinction between symbol and allegory" (20). On the ambivalence of the Benjaminian symbol, cf. Menke, *Sprachfiguren*, 432 – 433.

word: translation."[242] The assimilation to language, that I observed earlier in the examples of the child's handling of language, and the appealing signals of the child dictator thus become legible as two sides of the same gestural language, in which reception and production are each dialectically mediated through the other.

The Politics of Gestural Language

How does this definition of gesture relate to statements on the same in Benjamin's writings on Kafka and Brecht? [243] In the former, Benjamin refers to gesture as a matter of "bodily innervation" or even "reflex." However, it does not react to just any arbitrary object, but rather to a threatening "nightmare" (*Alb*) that must be combatted. Here, the gesture is marked by an "ambiguity before a decision": it can be either a "reflex of liberation" or "of submission."[244]

Benjamin made this note when planning to revise his Kafka essay at the beginning of 1935. It refers to a passage that treats how gestures of power precipitate into frameworks of social roles (employee and boss, sinner and clergyman). In contrast to the liberating, dialectical turn from the subject's assimilation to the creative transformation of the object presented earlier in this chapter, here Benjamin regards the gesture as an ambivalent expression of a socially predetermined power structure. Likewise, in his essays on Brecht, the gesture relates to the "devastations of our social order," the "one-eyed monster whose name is 'class society.'"[245] Such structures of power become visible in the gesture because it results from the interruption of an action, at which point the events sol-

242 Benjamin, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, *1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 69. Cf. Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, 35–37.

243 On Benjamin's theory of gesture in his writings on Kafka and Brecht, cf. Asman, "Die Rückbindung des Zeichens an den Körper"; Hamacher, "Die Geste im Namen"; Samuel Weber, "Citability – of Gesture" and "Violence and Gesture. Agamben Reading Benjamin Reading Kafka Reading Cervantes," in *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Nägele, "Von der Ästhetik zur Poetik"; Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, "Nachahmbarkeit. Zur Theorie des Gestischen als eines Theaters der Spur," in *Das Theater des 'konstruktiven Defaitismus.' Lektüren zur Theorie eines Theaters der A-Identität bei Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht und Heiner Müller* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2002).

244 Benjamin, notes related to Benjamin's writings on Franz Kafka, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 1261.

245 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," 5.

idify into "real conditions"[246] of society. Benjamin also discusses how the gesture preserves social reality in "Problems of the Sociology of Language," where, apropos of Marr's theory of language, he writes, "[t]he essential element in the life of language [...] appears to be the link between its evolution and certain social and economic groupings which underlie the groupings of social strata and tribes."[247]

Social power relations then are sedimented in gestures. According to Benjamin's reading of Kafka and Brecht, the task is to make the reader or spectator aware of this fact. Gestures do not only result from the interruption of an action, but also need this interruption in order to become visible as a language of the social. In keeping with Brecht's vision of the theater, Benjamin writes that the actor "must be able to space his gestures as the compositor produces spaced type."[248] Spectators should not become familiar with actors but be "distanced" from them. For only in this way can their astonishment at the seemingly familiar be roused and thereby also their interest in knowledge.[249] Elsewhere, he observes that Kafka offers no interpretation of gestures. Instead Kafka makes them the object of endless consideration by wresting them from their normal contexts and withholding any explanation of them. Benjamin presents Kafka's works also as theater in which "the author trie[s] to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings."[250] Here as elsewhere, Benjamin is not interested in the production of gestures, but in their analytical reception. This occurs along the same lines as the reading of gesture discussed above. There it was about a magical reading attending to the physiognomic dimension of language, which was initially defined as its gestural dimension. In the essay on Kafka, magical reading is not directed toward a supposedly immediate expression of the object or subject that has been sedimented in gestures, and within this the receptive-productive language itself, but rather toward social and historical elements sedimented in gestures.

The essay on Brecht also mentions "setting up an experiment"[251] regarding the interaction with gestural conditions, but with this Benjamin envisions more than a search for sociological sediment. He quotes the playwright, "[i]t can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way." [252] The experimental arrangement promotes the realization of "freedom" through engagement

246 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," 4.
247 Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," 3: 75.
248 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," 11.
249 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," 11.
250 Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," 801.
251 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," 4.
252 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," 8.

with gesture. As with Kafka, the gesture is ambivalent in Benjamin's reading of Brecht: "Twice Galy Gay is summoned to a wall, the first time to change his clothes, the second time to be shot."[253] Within the same gesture there is space for developmental play. What in one case means domination might in another context signify revolt. Making the gesture "quotable" – a Brechtian prescription to the actor that Benjamin endorses – aims for precisely this end. It involves not only alienation (*Verfremdung*) but also displacement into new contexts, a bricolage of gestures. The productive force that the theater displays, enacts, and rouses by means of this procedure recalls the productive force (which is likewise sedimented as the social element in gesture) of the social collective that created it. The subject that comes into language here is not that of individual psychology; it is a collective subject and inscribed with a specific historical and social index.

In the essay on Brecht, Benjamin calls the gesture the "mother of the dialectic."[254] And this is not only because it mediates between the moment of its own occurrence and the play's temporal flow. Like Brecht, he calls for the act of showing to be shown. Two gestures stand at issue: First is the theater's gestural reference to gestures in which both the social reality and linguistic-creative force of the historical collective are sedimented. That is the dialectic of the first gesture. The dialectic of the second gesture, that is, the theater's gestural referencing, lies in how its imitation of the first gesture simultaneously manifests its own freedom because it is not only imitating, but bricolaging and thereby creating space for interpretation. This second gesture is the one performed by the child dictator and director, mediating reception and creation as well as innervated nature and creative subject through one another. Yet this child is not necessarily the singular subject of individual psychology. On the contrary, Benjamin embeds this figure in a "children's collective"[255] and in the proletarian children's theater, where "the themes and symbols of class struggle [...] have a place."[256]

A gesture – whether that of the child director-dictator or that of the actor in epic theater – is subject to a double dialectic, namely both the uncovering of the sedimented social reality and the creative force of the historical collective, as well as the simultaneous imitation and re-creation of the gesture. With this double dialectical structure, Benjamin can read the child's gesture as "the *secret signal* of what is to come."[257] This is meant also in the sense that child actors

253 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," 12.
254 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," 12.
255 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 203.
256 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 205.
257 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 206.

who experience the "wild liberation of the [...] imagination" through the proletarian children's theater will not bear the burden of an unlived childhood later in life: "Through play, their childhood has been fulfilled. They carry no superfluous baggage around with them, in the form of overemotional childhood memories that might prevent them later on from taking action in an unsentimental way."[258] From undisturbed immersion in play there ultimately emerges an adult who does not perceive disenchantment as a deficiency but as a prerequisite for creating a different society.

The *Arcades Project:* The Child as Historiographical Model

On a semiotic register, the dialectical shift of 'primitive thinking' from mimesis as compulsion to liberating mimesis and mimesis as cunning, as well as from mimesis as illusion to mimesis as the play of bricolage, corresponds to a gestural language that is not spellbound by the world of things in mirroring imitation and as such, in turn, has a banishing effect on the world and users of language. Nor does this gestural language relate to objects by a mere arbitrary positing or instrumentalization by its users. Rather, in nonsensuous manner, it resembles the realm of objects and its users simultaneously, inasmuch as it is animated by the metaphoric model of the "creative innervation of the hand." Gestural language relates to things, but only by means of people, or more specifically, through the stimulation of their sensory systems by things and the creative transformation of these stimuli into artistic products. Gestural language always already implies appropriation, manipulation, transfer, translation, and transformation, through which human beings gain sovereignty without ignoring or colonizing the object in the process.

The sovereign child and his or her activities – cunning, destruction/bricolage, and gestural language – are models for the dialectical "detachment from an epoch" pursued by Benjamin in the early *Arcades Project* (until 1929).[259] Such detachment, which Benjamin also calls "awakening," is not a rupture so much as

258 Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 2.1: 205.

259 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 173. Benjamin indicates in a note to "Theses on the Philosophy of History," a late work, that children still play a central role – "as representatives of paradise" (*Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 1243). In a letter to Adorno, Benjamin declares children to be "a kind of corrective to society" (7 May 1940, in Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 330). Cf. Lindner, "Das *Passagen-Werk*," 236–242. Adorno's criticism that Benjamin does not proceed dialectically enough in the *Arcades Project* would therefore require qualification (Adorno to Benjamin, 2–4 August 1935, in Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 105).

the simultaneous engagement with and overcoming of the past, salvaging and new configuration, through which the past maintains or acquires its relevance for the present. In the early drafts of the *Arcades Project,* children (unlike the Surrealists) do not number among the figures caught in the realm of dreams.[260] Instead, the figure of the child exemplifies the strived for dialectical shift from enchantment to disenchantment. The recollections of childhood that Benjamin invokes in the early *Arcades Project* are not simply the memory of an enchanted world of things – he also calls the "dream figure" of the nineteenth century its "child's side"[261] because the child perceives the world as enchanted and because he himself was a child at that time[262]; but they are also the memory of this shift, this turn from enchantment to disenchantment. Benjamin models his project's detachment from the epoch of the nineteenth century after the child's "technique[s]."[263]

First of all, cunning: By immersing oneself in its dream side (for example, through involuntary memory or a childlike perception), one gets to know one's past epoch so well that one can interpret it. In so doing, one can free oneself from its mythical timelessness and its appearance as nature. The child one once was and one's own children play a vital role in this process:

> The fact that we were children during this time belongs together with its objective image. [...] The dream waits secretly for the awakening: the sleeper [...] waits for the second when he will cunningly wrest himself from its clutches. So, too, the dreaming collective, whose children provide the happy occasion for its own awakening.

Children recall to adults the dreamworld of their own childhoods, or rather: they make them aware of the world of their childhood *as* a dreamworld, from which they can now finally awaken. From their children and their own childhood experience, it becomes clear that the objects remembered from the past have a "symbolic character"[264] and therefore have the potential to be interpreted. This potential is decisive to the present adult's understanding. Benjamin differentiates this cunning detachment from a violent one.

260 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 13.
261 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5: 1006.
262 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5: 1006, 1024.
263 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5: 1002.
264 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 390.

> The genuine liberation from an epoch [...] has the structure of awakening in [that] it is entirely ruled by cunning. Only with cunning, not without it, can we work free of the realm of dream. But there is also a false liberation; its sign is violence.[265]

The violent detachment would in fact be bound right back (whether negatively in its de-posing suspension or positively in the new positing it carries out) to the myth whose spell it is seeking liberation from.

That cunning implies a demarcation from mythic violence is also indicated by Benjamin's referral to the *Arcades Project* as a "féerie,"[266] where he thus associates it with the fairy tale, which, as shown above, circumvents the violence of myth with cunning. Likewise, in another key passage, he affirms that the "most radical expression" of the "dialectical schematism" underlying the transition from dream to waking is found in Chinese "fairy tales."[267] Immediately after this statement, he presents his project's program:

> The new, dialectical method of doing history as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which the dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream! [268]

In other words, the "difficulty of this dialectical technique"[269] of awakening that he noted earlier may be resolved with help from the fairy tale and its cunning hero. The cunning fairy-tale hero of the early *Arcades Project*, however, is Benjamin himself, insofar as he only gets involved with the dreamworld of the nineteenth century in order to be able to first interpret it and then understand the present. And it is his text that, through its procedures, shields itself both against the spell of what has been and against its own positings.

Second, destruction and bricolage: In a letter to Adorno, Benjamin relates his use of the term *féerie* to the text's form: "This subtitle suggests the rhapsodic character of the presentation."[270] Later, he speaks of "rhapsodic naiveté" (implicitly referring to childhood) and "romantic form."[271] In music, rhapsody is characterized by the absence of a fixed form and the loose connection of motifs and themes often taken from a profane realm. Literary montage, the method Benjamin uses in the *Arcades Project*, takes this principle to an extreme. Thus,

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265 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 173.
266 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 389.
267 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 884.
268 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 389.
269 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 834.
270 Benjamin to Adorno, 31 May 1935, in *Complete Correspondence*, 88.
271 Benjamin to Adorno, 31 May 1935, in *Complete Correspondence*, 89.

the text gathers fragments – "rags, [...] refuse"[272] – from the nineteenth century in order to draw attention to and situate them in new relationships. The prime exponents of this method are the collector and the child. The collector has "withdrawn [the object] from [its] functional context" and takes no instrumental interest in it. Under his physiognomic gaze, the world, by means of this object, rearranges itself and invites unconventional interpretations; the perspective shifts from collecting to bricolage. The same process is at work among children. One of Benjamin's earliest notes for the *Arcades Project* reads, "Game in which children have to form a brief sentence out of given words. This game is seemingly played by the goods on display: binoculars and flower seeds, screws and musical scores, makeup and stuffed vipers, fur coats and revolvers."[273] Tellingly, Benjamin describes this novel "assembly" of things/words as "construct[ing] an alarm clock"[274] that serves the aim of awakening from enchantment to disenchantment.

Third, gesture: In the same note where Benjamin identifies his method as montage, he stresses that he does not want to describe or "*say* anything," only "show." The *Arcades Project* is to display a collection of texts. He intends to "purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations," but simply display "the rags, the refuse."[275] In other words, this means that the gestural method of the *Arcades Project* is based on the citation of passages: "This work has to develop to the highest height the art of citing without quotation marks."[276] Citation represents an intensive involvement with the source (intensified by the fact that the cited materials often receive no commentary) as well as a sovereign intervention into its original context, especially when this is made unrecognizable ("without quotation marks").[277] Citation performs a gesture that Benjamin discusses in relation to Brecht's epic theater:

> Interruption is one of the fundamental methods of all form-giving. [...] It is [...] the origin of the quotation. Quoting a text implies interrupting its context. It will be readily understood, therefore, that epic theatre, which depends on interruption, is quotable in a very specific sense.[278]

272 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 460.
273 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 540.
274 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 883.
275 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 460.
276 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 458.
277 Pethes deems this the destruction of destruction inasmuch as the trace of quotation is erased (Pethes, *Mnemographie*, 403).
278 Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [Second Version]," in *Understanding Brecht,* trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), 19. On interruption as destruction, see Menninghaus, "Wal-

Just as the epic theater suspends the situations in which characters find themselves, Benjamin interrupts his material by taking passages out of context and incorporating them as citations into the *Arcades Project*. He seeks out what has been overlooked ("the rags, the refuse") and shows them – in this sense his project proceeds gesturally. At the same time, as in the situations in Brecht's theater, the citations themselves become recognizable as gestures in which a receptive-productive approach to the nineteenth century has sedimented. With this procedure, Benjamin brings to light the "dream side" of the texts and the world from which they come, i.e., an interpretation is to be gained from them that had been previously obscured.

Benjamin therefore connects quotation with the hope of knowledge ("awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been"[279]). The essay on Kraus, which was written at the same time, hints at this too. Quotation is said to "summon [...] the word by its name" inasmuch as it "wrenches it destructively from its context" and "calls it back to its origin."[280] Here, the term origin is used in the same sense as in the Brecht essay, where it refers to the "real conditions" to which the "astonished" spectator is awakened by the alienation effect.

In the early *Arcades Project*, the destruction of textual context is attended by the hope of a dissolution of mythic timelessness, tied to a "now of recognizability"[281] that would facilitate the reader's insight into "what has been" and, at the same time, promote critical understanding of the present. For Benjamin, "writing history" means "citing history."[282] The bricolage of quotations follows the pattern of the "forceful impact"[283] of cinematic images that trains the viewer to become aware of and reflect on stimuli. Benjamin compares this pattern to the procedure of gesture in his discussion of the epic theater. Thus, the finger's signifying gesture is preserved and the 'showing is shown' to the extent that the citational quality of the citations is exhibited through their alienating composition. Just as Brecht juxtaposes situations, Benjamin places contrasting quotations side by side. Such bricolage does not create a new whole – a new historical order or definitive interpretation of history – but serves to highlight individual quotes and their reciprocal alienation, challenging the reader to think.

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ter Benjamins Diskurs der Destruktion." On the poetics of destruction in *The Arcades Project,* see Pethes, *Mnemographie*, 391–437.

279 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 907.

280 Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 2.2: 454.

281 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 486.

282 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 458. For a thorough discussion of the role of quotation in Benjamin, see Menke, *Sprachfiguren*, 371–393.

283 Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [Second Version]," 21.

These final remarks indicate how central the figure of the child (with its procedures of cunning, destruction/bricolage, and gesture elaborated above) is for Benjamin's philosophy of history and thought as a whole, specifically as a model for Benjamin's approach to the nineteenth century. Here, immersion in what has been forms the precondition for detaching from it, and the fragmentation and temporary montage of its parts can only succeed on the basis of intimate knowledge. The two laws governing child's play – destruction and mimesis – proceed dialectically and determine the process of the materialist historian. Also at stake is a sovereignty that no longer stands in the mythic spell of what has been (as, for example, Benjamin observes of the Surrealists). Instead, it can be gained by means of an intensive passage through that past and its subsequent reflection.

If Benjamin's works present the child as a sublation of the 'primitive,' and if this dialectical turn is, in his view, missing from the efforts of the Collège de Sociologie to renew the sacred and mythical present,[284] then the same expectation holds for his vision for the materialist historian: he must proceed like the child. In this way, the *Arcades Project* may also be understood as an ethnology-in-reverse that seeks out a foreign perspective in order to defamiliarize one's own culture. Indeed, the epigraph for "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," which outlines the book he never completed, is taken from a visitor to the city, Nguyen-Trong-Hiep. Describing the French metropolis, the Vietnamese traveler observes with curiosity, "[o]ne goes for a walk; the *grandes dames* go for a walk; behind them stroll the *petites dames*."[285] European customs seem strange and incomprehensible to foreign eyes. The enchantment experienced through the childlike gaze is joined by the alienation of the everyday, which challenges readers not to dream, but to interpret their own culture.

284 On Benjamin's relationship to this group, see Moebius, *Die Zauberlehrlinge*, 370 – 375.
285 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 3.