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## Colonial and Communist Pedagogy

### Abstract

Walter Benjamin wrote about pedagogy from the start of his writing life to its close. He was also an activist in the youth movement in Germany. This essay explores the importance of childhood, play, toys and education to his wider body of work – including his interests in photography, literary form, language acquisition and use, modern art. The opening up of these areas in relation to questions of pedagogy enables the organization of his thought in relation to two complexes: ‘colonial’ and ‘communist’ pedagogy. What these mean, what determines them and how they further Benjamin’s project of emancipation, which begins with youth, is scrutinised here.

### Anti-pathos

Walter Benjamin was interested in pedagogy from the beginning to end of his writing career, and he makes frequent reference to what constitutes pedagogy, be it modes of teaching and learning in more or less traditional educational settings, or, much more broadly, the capacities of toys, films and radio shows to educate and elucidate children as well as adults. The interest in pedagogy was stimulated by his bad experiences within the Wilhelmine education system and their mitigation by the time spent in a progressive boarding school in the countryside. He involved himself from early days in the Youth Movement of pre-war Germany. It was this involvement that led to his first published piece of writing, which appeared in 1912, when he was 20 years of age. This was a critique of Lily Braun’s manifesto for school children, titled *The Emancipation of Children: A Speech to School Youth* (Braun 1911). Benjamin’s critique was published in a journal titled *Die freie Schulgemeinde* (The Free School Community) and it was signed by a ‘Primaner der Staatsschule’, that is to say a student in the final year of high school. Benjamin was himself still almost a child. Young he was, but he spoke with the authority of a youth activist, who had spent time thinking about questions of education. And he was scornful of Braun’s positions.

as much as Lily Braun speaks to the youth from school, she loses her listeners from her view, rambles past them towards some sort of empty, negative ideal of Freedom. Aimlessness, despite all its fanaticism, is the main characteristic of this text (Benjamin 1991, 9).

Benjamin countered Braun's idealism with some more concrete propositions. For Benjamin, youth is a political subject. Youth represents a new social movement desirous of emancipation and to be set alongside 'the liberation struggles, which were led by 'the slaves of antiquity, the peasants of the middle ages, the citizens of the epoch of revolution, the workers and women of the present'. And these struggles of youth are not to be conceived of as a reaction to subjugation in itself, but rather produce something more positive, even as it is destructive. The 'new youth, who out of the consciousness of themselves as *youthful people* place once more a higher sense and purpose in their existence', render today's schools as a ruin. There is a revolution in consciousness, in modes of apperception and apprehension. Such are the stakes of Benjamin's interest in adolescence, in school, in emancipation and these interests exist from the earliest days of his writing career. His conceptions of youth and its desire and proximity to emancipation, as well as the social thwarting of this desire, do not renounce their intensity over time, but become increasingly materialist.

Children are oppressed and Benjamin will variously tot up how, finding traces of their oppression in everyday habits and mores. Technological media, for one, provide an image of the oppression. In autobiographical reflections in the early 1930s, Benjamin relates how, when being photographed as a child in a studio with a crudely painted backdrop of the Alps, brandishing a kidskin hat, he felt that the screens and pedestals 'craved my image much as the shades of Hades craved the blood of the sacrificial animal'. The photographic studio presented itself to him as an amalgam of boudoir and torture chamber (Benjamin 2006, 132). There exists a photograph of him, at the age of five, standing alone, encircled by a fuzzy ellipsoid, holding a sword and a flag. He is dressed up as a soldier. Studio photography obliged the subject, he noted, to assume uncomfortable poses, dress up in clothes that are nothing but costumes, and gaze out from amongst a muddle of counterfeit and haphazard objects, props that submerge the insubstantial human body. The child is most powerless of all in this scenario, for while the adult may have submitted willingly to it, the child is more likely cajoled and the image will not be for him or her. The deceitful and unhappy, but also simultaneously, collective nature of this experience, is acknowledged, when Benjamin explores an image of Kafka which was in his possession. The photograph shows Kafka as a boy, and yet Benjamin describes it as if it were himself, for he too had been in this abject situation:

I am standing there bareheaded, my left hand holding a giant sombrero which I dangle with studied grace. My right hand is occupied with a walking stick, whose curved handle can be seen in the foreground, while its tip remains hidden in a bunch of flowers spilling from a garden table (Benjamin 2006, 132).

The scene is absurd. A child far from the sun idly holds a sunhat. A child who is not lame draggles a walking stick. These props overwhelm the image and the child. The child is the prop for the props and for the whole system of photography. The child learns its place in this world, as some sort of appendage of the machinery. Something comes to be known from this scene, but it was not an intended knowledge. It is the one that Benjamin divines later, after some years delay.

Throughout his life Benjamin returned to questions of childhood and knowledge. He was interested in pedagogy – in its broadest sense - and the ways in which children come to know and learn. He addressed ‘pedagogy’ at various turns. Across various essays and reviews, he characterised what he called ‘colonial pedagogy’ and, alternatively, what might be called ‘communist pedagogy’. One could go as far to say that Benjamin’s entire interest is in schooling and in considering what might count as a genuine mode of schooling in the modern age, whereby such schooling might be postulated as an anti-capitalist practice. Here are lines from autobiographical reflections.

Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley (Benjamin 2006, 53).

To be lost, properly lost in the new nature that is the urban world, the metropolis with its clutter of street signs, requires schooling, techniques that may take time to master, if mastery is the appropriate word. It is rather than mastery a question of distraction, of letting go of rational and conscious control. Benjamin learnt this through the school of Surrealism. Surrealism made an art of strolling through a cityscape made of everyday peculiarities and chance encounters. Surrealists enjoyed the enclaves of anomaly that still nestled in the rationalised city. These niches, with their remnants of the past or ludicrous juxtapositions of

objects, operated according to a different rhythm than that of the ordered city (Benjamin 2002, 100). In particular, the Surrealists cherished the remaining arcades, the cut through hallways of shops, which had seen better days for the most part. The Surrealists treated these as if they were passages into the unconscious of the city. Benjamin followed them. The Surrealists emphasised the reverie that could befall a flâneur wandering through the streets and arcades, disconnected from the purposiveness of regular daily life. In Benjamin's account of his own wanderings and getting lost, he relates how he learns or unlearns to find his way (in life, as in the city) in the future, as he grows into an adult, through a non-school based schooling.

This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks (Benjamin 2006, 54).

Benjamin absorbed not what he was supposed to learn in the classroom, but the unconscious and arbitrary blots of ink and doodles, a swirling encounter with the uncanniness of known and unknown paths. Benjamin's proposal for schooling, if we can argue that his various essays amount to as much, often works negatively. It is anti-pedagogical, anti-historicist, anti-linear, and destructive. Here, as elsewhere, Benjamin overturns the hierarchy of 'major' (older) and minor (young) things, people, events, writings, forms and so on.

### Colonial Pedagogy

'Colonial Pedagogy' is the title of a review by Benjamin for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1930 (Benjamin 1991, 272-4). It concerns a book on the German fairy tale by Alois Jalkotzy. Benjamin begins, in characteristic fashion, with observations on the book cover, the marginal or seemingly incidental aspect of the book. It is the aspect derived by marketers. And yet, this does not compromise how it might be 'read' by an astute eye. Benjamin observes how 'the cover gives it totally away right from the start'. It is a photomontage of towers, skyscrapers, factory chimneys in the background, with a powerful locomotive in the middle distance and at the front of this landscape of concrete, asphalt and steel, a dozen children gathered around their nursery teacher, who is telling a fairy tale. The fairy tale, so the book recommends, is to be relocated in the cement deserts of the city, updated for the current day. Benjamin is, yet again, scornful.

It is not easy to find a book which demands the relinquishment of that which is most genuine and original with the same taken-for-grantedness that unreservedly dismisses a child's delicate and hermetic fantasy as an emotional demand, having understood it from the perspective of a commodity-producing society, in which education is regarded with such dismal impartiality as an opportunity for colonial sales of cultural wares. The type of child psychology in which the author is well versed is the exact counterpart to that famous 'psychology of primitive peoples' as heaven-sent consumers of European junk wares. It exposes itself from all sides ... (Benjamin 1991, 272-3).

Benjamin goes on to counter the author's psychologising. '*The fairy tale allows the child to equate itself with the hero*. This need for identification corresponds to that infantile weakness, which it experiences in relation to the adult world' states Jalkotzy. This Benjamin denies, appealing to Freud's theory of infantile superiority in his study of narcissism. The child does not equate itself with the hero. The child does not actually feel weak in the adult world. Their psychology is more complex than that. The book's author makes the mistake of imposing contemporary mores onto child psychology, but even to protest against this would be

to take too much trouble with a text in which superficiality is proclaimed so fanatically, unleashing, under the banner of the contemporary moment, a holy war against everything that does not correspond to the 'present sensibility' and which places children (like certain African tribes) in the first line of battle (Benjamin 1991, 273).

What draws Benjamin to the child is not the desire to mould their inadequate sensibilities into adult shapes, but rather to parade children's alienness, which the fairy tale has historically managed to do, and which, in its conveyance into the present, it might yet achieve. Benjamin cites Jalkotzy's contrary assessment:

'The elements from which the fairy tale draws are frequently unusable, antiquated and alien to our contemporary sensibilities. A special role is played by the evil stepmother. Child murderers and cannibals are typical figures of the German folk and fairy tale. The thirst for blood is striking, the portrayal of murder and killing

is favoured. Even the supernatural world of the fairy tale is, above all, frightening. Grimms' collection teems with the lust for beatings. The German folk and fairy tale is frequently pro-alcohol, or at least never opposed to alcohol.' (Benjamin 1991, 273).

For these reasons the fairy tale of the past should be repelled, insists Jalkotzky, turned to waste matter, and new ones need be written to match the 'contemporary sensibility'. One for which, apparently, the spinning wheel should be replaced by the sewing machine and princely castles by stately homes. For, notes Jalkotzky,

For 'the monarchical polish of our Central European world is happily overcome, and the less we place this spook and night-mare of German history in front of our children, the better will it be for our children and for the development of the German nation and its democracy'. No! (Benjamin 1991, 274).

Benjamin queries: what if it were the case that children, given the choice, would rather run into the cannibal's throat than into that of the new pedagogy? 'And thereby for their part prove themselves to be alienated from the 'contemporary sensibility'?' Benjamin appeals against 'fun-loving reformism', which 'sails under the flags of psychology, folklore and pedagogy' and turns the fairy tale into 'an export commodity', which is 'freighted to a dark corner of the globe, where the children in the plantations yearn for its pious mode of thinking'. The quasi-democrats of the present attempt to colonise the mind of the child with new values, just as they bring so-called progress and light to the colonies. The darkness has not been chased out, but should it ever be?

### Communist Pedagogy

In a 1929 review of communist pedagogue Edwin Hoernle's *Grundfragen der proletarischen Erziehung* [Basic Questions, of Proletarian Education], Benjamin noted that 'Psychology and ethics are the poles around which bourgeois education theory revolves' (Benjamin 2005, 274). Official education theory attempts, through force, and then cunning, to harmonise the natural being and the ideal state of being. By contrast, 'proletarian education theory is predicated not on two abstract pieces of data but on one concrete reality' (Benjamin 2005, 274). It is the reality of class. Communist pedagogy recognises this and so teaches class-

consciousness and opposition to the bourgeois state, and never loses sight of the unity of theory and practice in a polytechnical education that inculcates ‘universal readiness’. Benjamin observes in this review that ‘the Marxist dialectical anthropology of the proletarian child is a neglected field of research’ and it would be on this basis that any pedagogue might establish what a Communist pedagogy requires. This pedagogy would, like the education Benjamin forwards, envelop practice with theory, for it would not speak abstractly of psychology and morals, but rather generate ‘detailed records - prepared according to the principles of materialist dialectics - of the actual experiences of working-class children in kindergartens, youth groups, children's theaters, and outdoor groups’ (Benjamin 2002, 275).

In the absence of such studies, Benjamin made his own observations. He was attuned to the barbaric qualities of the child, observing the ‘grotesque, cruel and grim side of children’s life’, and the ‘despotic and dehumanised element in children’ (Benjamin 2005, 100). Play is a game of building up and knocking down. Through destruction, children invoke their own creativity – though they also invoke the very energies of world making and unmaking, for as Benjamin notes: ‘destroying rejuvenates in clearing away the traces of our own age’ (Benjamin 2004b, 543). Children assault the books they read, scribbling on them, creasing them, tearing them. They are marked by the smudges of grubby children’s hands. They turn them into waste matter, using them up, until they cannot be used any more. Some books invite destruction at the hands of children, notes Benjamin. For example, monochrome woodcuts - simple, plain illustrations in fairy tales - introduce children to the world of script. The images draw children into the world of the image, as they fill in the world with colours that they source from their imagination. They are drawn into the image and complete it by scribbling over it.

In his various essays on play and toys, Benjamin argues that the mode of play stems from the child’s wish for sensuous experience, which emerges out of actions. ‘A child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse; he wants to play with sand, and so he turns into a baker; he wants to hide, and so he turns into a robber or a policeman.’ (Benjamin 2005, 115) Toys, then, are likely to only limit the parameters of action and snip the coils of imagination.

the more appealing toys are, in the ordinary sense of the term, the further they are from genuine playthings; the more they are based on imitation, the further away they lead us from real, living play (Benjamin 2005, 115-6).

Such toys ‘tend to show what adults understand by toys rather than what children expect from them’ (Benjamin 2005, 101). It is like the pedagogy that wishes to mould the child into something the adult recognizes as worthy. Indeed, the toys that interested Benjamin particularly were those he had photographed at Sergiev, a centre for toy manufacture about 70 kilometres from Moscow and on which he made notes. These were crude objects of which he observes: ‘Demotic toys strive for simplified forms’. These overlooked forms were the real toys – the ones that allowed for imagination and play, much as for Baudelaire the ‘primitive’ and ‘barbaric’ ‘cardboard Polchinelle, activated by a single thread’, ‘toys for a penny, a halfpenny, a farthing’ present ‘a gift to the poetry of childhood’ (Baudelaire 1964, 199-200). Benjamin scornfully states in a critical review of a book about dolls and puppets from 1930 titled ‘In Praise of the Doll’, by an author who ‘knows little of the spirit of play’, that an obsession with the finest remnants of history is far less interesting than pursuing the demotic, or, as he puts it at the end of the review, ‘making history from the rubbish of history’ (Benjamin 1991, 218).

And if we see ten Nymphenburg porcelain dolls reproduced, then we ask what has happened to the extraordinary clay dolls, which do not stem from state-backed manufacture, but from the hands of peasants of the region Viatka? Instead of the good-for-nothing funny doll made of gramophone material, we would rather see paper stuck together to make chimney sweeps, market sellers, the master’s coachmen, bakers and school girls, which one can buy in Riga for a few pennies in toy shops and stationers (Benjamin 1991, 214).

Benjamin observes too that, ‘the entire process of their production and not merely its result - is alive for the child in the toy’ (Benjamin 1986, 123). In *Toys and Play*, he clarifies that their simplicity has less to do with the shapes that these crude toys form, and more to do with the transparent nature of the manufacturing process, and in particular, carving in particular, which ‘can give free rein to their imagination without becoming the least incomprehensible’ (Benjamin 2005, 119). These toys are products of craft and they evoke craft in a wider sense. In a note, he writes:

Toy is hand tool – not artwork (Benjamin 2007, 73).

That is to say, these toys, maybe all toys, are tools. They are things of use, something to be used. Though that is not to say that they are simply functional. They are tools for grasping the world of larger forms on which they base themselves. They are made by hand and are manipulated by the hand, as the child plays. Fineness of form is not the crucial thing, rather the effectiveness with which they allow the child to prise a way into the world of play and beyond that into the world itself. That is wherein their usefulness lies.

The child grabs at whatever is to hand. The child improvises in its quest for knowledge. Childish imagination works on the lowliest objects without discrimination. By playing with the broken-down and the unwanted, children combine ‘materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship’ (Benjamin 2004a, 450). He continues

Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one. The norms of this small world must be kept in mind, if one wishes to create things specially for children, rather than let one’s adult activity, through its requisites and instruments, find its own way to them (Benjamin 2004a, 450).

It is better for adult activity to find its way, its own way, to children and for children to use these in their own way. In this way and anew, the world is built. The world is built of scraps. The scraps are re-functioned. Matter is re-evaluated. That which is valueless becomes precious, much as the household’s discarded silver foil became precious silver in the child-Benjamin’s hands. For the child, his drawers must become an arsenal and a zoological garden, a crime museum and a crypt. To tidy up, to throw away or to put things in a designated place, would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tin foil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields. These scraps are repurposed and given new life, or life for the first time. The fairy tale itself, a form so beloved in childhood, is likewise a waste product – not in Jalkotzky’s sense of outmodedness, but rather it is a waste product because it emerges from the growth and decay of the saga. This lodging of the fairy tale within that which is declined, unvalued, makes it available to children in another way, for other purposes:

Children are able to manipulate fairy tales with the same ease and lack of inhibition that they display in playing with pieces of cloth or building blocks. They build their world out of motifs from the fairy tale, combining its various elements (Benjamin 2004a, 408).

And to the child, its own body becomes just such a found scrap as it merges with curtains, becomes wood, trains, windmills. It was something Benjamin had observed of his own son Stefan:

For a very short period he imitated lifeless objects, eg. a pear, by coiling himself up on the ground (Benjamin 2007, 117).

The child is indiscriminating, perhaps a communist in the object world. And this child is ready to embark on new adventures, not as a colonialist discovering that which is unknown to him but must become known. Rather as a being that without prejudice exposes itself as much to the old as the new, building knowledge for itself.

Benjamin was enthusiastic about the educational textbooks of Tom Seidmann-Freud, pseudonym of Martha-Gertrud Freud, and he reviewed her reading, writing and numeracy primers for children, which included *Hurra, wir lesen! Hurra, wir schreiben!* and *Hurra, wir rechnen!*, both from 1930 and 1931. In his review of one primer, which he titled 'Verdant Elements', he cites a line from another, describing Seidmann-Freud's intent:

'It is not oriented towards "appropriation" and "mastery" of a particular task – this style of learning only suits grown-ups – rather it takes account of the child, for whom learning, as with everything else, naturally signifies a great adventure. (Benjamin 1991, 311).

And Benjamin goes on to explain in some detail the qualities of this pedagogical work, which is a development from the earlier primer, leading the child further into the world of script.

If, at the beginning of this adventurous journey, flowers and colours, children's names and names of countries were the little islands in the sea of fantasy, then it is now segmented continents, the world of leaves on trees and fish, shops and

butterflies, which rise up from the water. Resting places and little huts to lodge in have been provided everywhere: this means that it is not necessary for the child to write on and on to the point of exhaustion. Rather, there an image awaits his signature, here a story awaits the missing words; there again a cage waits for a bird to be sketched-in, or – elsewhere – a dog, a donkey and a cock await their woof, bray and cook-a-doodle-do. Groupings and classifications join in, now and again they are even of a lexical type, whereby painted things are written out according to initials, or, just as in a real encyclopaedia, in topics organised by concepts. Small boxes are as good for ABCs as for things made of leather, wood, metal and glass, or for furniture, fruits and objects of everyday use. With all of this, the child is never placed in front of, but rather above the object of instruction: as if, for example, in a zoological class, he or she were not led in front of the horse, but rather placed upon it as a rider. Here every letter, every word and drawing is such a horse, which accompanies all the stages of this learning process. With its curves, just as with its bridle and collar, it is able to bring all that is recalcitrant under the control of the little rider (Benjamin 1991, 311-2).

Seidmann-Freud recognises the impulse of the child to scribble: ‘There are enough white spots to be painted and scribbled on, broad fertile territories, on which all monsters and favourites of their owner can be settled commodiously’ (Benjamin 1991, 313). Benjamin uses Seidmann-Freud’s primer to settle what he calls a pedagogical dispute – can a child learn what not to do from error? Yes, he insists, as long as the error is an exaggerated one. He describes the exaggerations in the primer:

Adolf lived at the house of a bumpkin together with little Cecily – is that not an exaggeration of the world order, to allow all the nouns up to ‘witchcraft’ and ‘Yucatan’ to appear in the story in the correct alphabetic sequence? In the end, does it not mean exaggerating even the regard for the preschool pupil? To place questionnaires in front of him as before a professor: what are you doing on Monday? Tuesday? Wednesday? etc., or to cover a table for him with lined plates on which he may write his favourite meals? – Yes, but Shock-Headed Peter<sup>1</sup>, too,

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<sup>1</sup> Known in German as *Struwwelpeter* and published in 1845.

is exaggerated, Max and Moritz<sup>2</sup> are exaggerated, as is Gulliver. Robinson's loneliness is exaggerated and so is what Alice saw in Wonderland – why should not letters and numbers also have to authenticate themselves in front of children through their exaggerated exuberance? (Benjamin 1991, 314)

Benjamin stands by exaggeration. It means literally to heap into a pile – somewhat like the famous skyward growing one that Benjamin sees Klee's *Angelus Novus* seeing

### In Clover

Benjamin's ideas are indiscriminating, lurching, for example, from the realm of primers to the realm of poetry, or from toys to art. For Benjamin, Paul Klee was the most worthwhile modern artist of his day. Benjamin pinpointed Paul Klee's work as an art in which the 'linear structure' predominates and so opens itself up to a certain inhabitation by the perceiving imagination (Benjamin 1978, 154). In Klee's images, the fairy tale springs to life and invites the viewer in. Through Klee's line, the viewer enters into the imaginative sketch of the world. Paul Klee re-evaluated rubbish too. He included a doodle in his catalogue of works for 1918. A few figures jotted on a scrap of paper used in his job as a clerk on a German airfield had been turned into trees. The numbers become prickly fruit ready for plucking. Predictable logic transfigures into an exceptional crop. The artist occupies the natural world, but it is also a supernatural world, conjured up by an imagination so potent that even the ordinariness and rationality of number is adapted into a rare fruit. The doodle, which he repeated a few times, including in 1918, as *Garden of Number Trees* and in 1919, as *Number-Tree Landscape*, joined two worlds in one image: the world of being an office worker, who doodles, in odd moments when not calculating, and the world of the artist, who sketches.

Klee was a teacher at the Bauhaus, there at the heart of an extraordinary educational experiment. His first course there ran from November 1921 until December 1922. It was titled *Pictorial Form Instruction*. One section, a lecture from 1922, was titled 'Scenes in the Department Store', and it tackled the vagaries of artistic quality and built up a pictorial vocabulary by reference to a real adult world situation. The reference to the world of commerce would once have seemed odd at the Bauhaus, which had promulgated an image of

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<sup>2</sup> Max and Moritz are Wilhelm's Busch's naughty little boys, who engage in a series of pranks in drawn and verse form in a book published in 1865.

the craftsman in love with his work, parting from it only unwillingly and for whom money making is just a necessary evil. Such otherworldliness had been battered through the hard years of post-war economic emergency. The Bauhaus students were now trained to produce enhanced value through excellence of form and aesthetic judgement. Explored in this part of the course, set in a department store, is the relation of product to measure, weight and quality. A customer receives a bucket of red merchandise. The merchant asks for 100 marks. A customer requests a bucket of blue merchandise. The customer receives it and it is clearly heavier. The merchant asks for 200 marks – stating it is twice as heavy. A customer requests a bucket of green merchandise at the same weight. The merchant weighs it out and asks for 400 marks. The customer asks why. The merchant says that it is twice as good, much tastier, more in demand, more beautiful. The first scene demonstrates measure and it is accompanied by lines, long ones, short ones, coarse ones, fine ones. The second scene illustrates weight and it is accompanied by blocks of tone - bright, dark, heavy, light. The third depicts quality and, when considered in the lecture, was to evoke colour and the following words: more in demand, more beautiful, better, too saturating, cooling, too hot, ugly, too sweet, too sour, too beautiful. Such were the life lessons that Klee turned into image and imparted to students at the Bauhaus. Colour, sensation, experience becomes annexed to a commercial situation. The pedagogy is a training in salesmanship, perhaps even more than an exploration of the senses. Aesthetics works for the market. Arty has only so much possibility about it.

### Fetus Novus

A child achieves what Klee will fail to do – as Klee is pulled into the worlds of art and value and selling his scraps and doodles to the art market and his art students to the commercial market. A child acts, it would seem, under the spur of imagination. A child is new.<sup>3</sup> A child is new in the world and the world is new to it, even in its oldest parts. ‘The task of childhood’, Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*, is ‘to bring the new world into symbolic space. The child, in fact, can do what the grownup absolutely cannot: recognize the new once again’ (Benjamin 1999, 390) Not the old new or the ever recurrent one that looks new – but the truly new that reaches back to the oldest impulses of all, that escapes the power of the thing, by

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<sup>3</sup> For a good survey of the meaning of childhood in Walter Benjamin’s oeuvre, see Carlo Salzani, ‘Experience and Play: Walter Benjamin and the Prelapsarian Child’, *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity* edited by Andrew E. Benjamin, Charles Rice, (Victoria: re.press, 2009, pp. 175-198.)

which Benjamin means the commodity fetish. Benjamin assumes a double birth. This double birth is of humanity, a humanity born again into childhood through technology and learning how to operate within a remediated world. In turning to the child as a resource of hope, Benjamin shows how his Marxism is inflected by Romantic ideas of the child as emissary from a prelapsarian world. It is not a naïve Romanticism, for it does not relinquish the energies of destruction and aggression. The task of the Marxist is to target those negative energies correctly. The grown-up Benjamin put his efforts into discovering how to rediscover the mode of being of the floundering, playing child. He explored how and under what conditions technology – in the shape of what he called ‘second technology’ – might mediate a ‘different nature’, which could be a mutable one, a better world inside our unhappy world, for it is a realm of play, transformation and potentiality, as transformative of what is as snow when it blankets the Earth, smoothing roughness or obliterating colour, as transformative as the flurry of snowflakes that disrupts the usual functions of the self and the environment, and takes us back to a wistful, perhaps never-never land, of childhood, which stands for hope.

Benjamin’s interest in pedagogy is a critical one. His particular blend of Marxism and Romantic themes, of natural philosophy and a terror of the catastrophe that has brought war and imperialism, leads him to characterize, with some urgency and repeatedly, the negative aspects of schooling, of colonial and capitalist pedagogy, as training for war, work and the domination of some over others. His sympathy for play and puzzles, his experience of progressive education, experiments in radio for children – all these practices combine with his theoretical reflections on revolution and emancipation to sketch out some aspects of what a communist pedagogy might entail.