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# Walter Benjamin

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SELECTED WRITINGS

VOLUME 2

1927–1934

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Translated by Rodney Livingstone  
and Others

Edited by Michael W. Jennings,  
Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith

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Frontispiece: Walter Benjamin, Berlin, 1929. Photo by Charlotte Joël. Courtesy of the Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, Frankfurt am Main.

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# The Cultural History of Toys

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Karl Gröber, *Kinderspielzeug aus alter Zeit: Eine Geschichte des Spielzeugs* [Children's Toys from Olden Times: A History of Toys] (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1928), 68 pages, with 306 black-and-white illustrations and 12 color plates.

At the beginning of Karl Gröber's book *Kinderspielzeug aus alter Zeit*, we find a self-denying ordinance. The author declares that he will not discuss children's games, so as to be able to focus more on his physical material and devote himself exclusively to the history of toys. The extraordinary density not so much of his topic as of his own method has led him to concentrate on the European tradition. If this meant Germany was at the geographic center, then in this sphere it is also the spiritual center. For a good proportion of the most beautiful toys that we still encounter in museums and homes may be described as a German gift to Europe. Nuremberg is the home of the tin soldier and the well-kept collection of animals from Noah's ark. The oldest known dollhouse comes from Munich. Even people who have no patience with claims to priority, claims that are of little consequence in this context anyway, will readily agree that they are presented with unsurpassable examples of simple beauty in Sonneberg's wooden dolls (Illustration 192), the trees made of wood shavings from the Erzgebirge (Illustration 190), the spice shops and bonnet shops (Illustrations 274 and 275, Plate X), and the harvest festival scene in pewter from Hanover.

Of course, such toys were not originally the invention of toy manufacturers, but were produced in the workshops of wood carvers, pewterers, and so forth. Not until the nineteenth century did toymaking become the province of a branch-industry of its own. The particular style and beauty of toys

of the older kind can be understood only if we realize that toys used to be a by-product of the many handicrafts that were all subject to the rules and regulations of the guilds, so that each member could manufacture only products that fell within the definition of his own trade. In the course of the eighteenth century, when manufacturing began to be specialized, producers everywhere came up against the restrictions imposed by the guilds. The guilds forbade turners to paint their own dolls, and they compelled workers in various trades who made toys from all sorts of different materials to divide the simplest work among themselves and so made the goods more expensive.

It obviously follows from this that sales, particularly retail sales in toys, were not the province of special toy sellers. You could find carvings of animals at the woodworker's shop, tin soldiers at the boilermaker's, gum-resin figurines at the confectioner's, and wax dolls at the candlemaker's. The picture was rather different at the wholesale level. Here too the middlemen, the so-called *Verlag*, originated in Nuremberg, where exporters began to buy up toys from the urban handicraft industry and above all from the homeworkers and distribute them among retailers. At around the same time, the advance of the Reformation forced many artists who had formerly worked for the Church "to shift to the production of goods to satisfy the demand for craftwork, and to produce smaller art objects for domestic use, instead of large-scale works." This led to a huge upsurge in the production of the tiny objects that filled toy cupboards and gave such pleasure to children, as well as the collections of artworks and curiosities that gave such pleasure to adults. It was this that created the fame of Nuremberg and led to the hitherto unshaken dominance of German toys on the world market.

If we survey the entire history of toys, it becomes evident that the question of size has far greater importance than might have been supposed. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the long-term decline in these things begins, we see toys becoming larger; the unassuming, the tiny, and the playful all slowly disappear. It was only then that children acquired a playroom of their own and a cupboard in which they could keep books separately from those of their parents. There can be no doubt that the older volumes with their smaller format called for the mother's presence, whereas the modern quartos with their insipid and indulgent sentimentality are designed to enable children to disregard her absence. The process of emancipating the toy begins. The more industrialization penetrates, the more it decisively eludes the control of the family and becomes increasingly alien to children and also to parents.

Of course, the false simplicity of the modern toy was based on the authentic longing to rediscover the relationship with the primitive, to recuperate the style of a home-based industry that at this very time was locked in an increasingly hopeless struggle for survival in Thuringia and the Erzge-

birge. Anyone who has been following the statistics on wages knows that these industries are heading toward their demise. This is doubly regrettable, particularly when you realize that of all the available materials none is more suitable than wood, thanks to its resilience and its ability to take paint. And in general it is this external point of view—the question of technology and materials—that leads the observer most deeply into the world of toys. Gröber brings this out in a highly illuminating and instructive way. If we look beyond the question of materials and glance at the child playing, we may speak of an antinomian relationship. It looks like this: On the one hand, nothing is more suitable for children than playhouses built of harmonious combinations of the most heterogeneous materials—stone, plasticine, wood, and paper. On the other hand, no one is more chaste in the use of materials than children: a bit of wood, a pinecone, a small stone—however unified and unambiguous the material is, the more it seems to embrace the possibility of a multitude of figures of the most varied sort. And when adults give children dolls made of birchbark or straw, a cradle made of glass, or boats made of pewter, they are attempting to respond in their own way to the children's feelings. In this microcosm, wood, bones, wickerwork, and clay are the most important materials, all of which were already used in patriarchal times, when toys were still a part of the production process that found parents and children together. Later came metals, glass, paper, and even alabaster. The alabaster bosom that seventeenth-century poets celebrated in their poems was to be found only in dolls, whose fragility often cost them their existence.

A review like this can only hint at the riches of Gröber's work, the thoroughness of its underlying research, the beguiling objectivity of its presentation. This completely successful collection of illustrations is perfect at the technical level, too. Anyone who fails to read it attentively will scarcely know what toys are, let alone their importance. This last question leads, of course, beyond the framework of the book to a philosophical classification of toys. As long as the realm of toys was dominated by a dour naturalism, there were no prospects of drawing attention to the true face of a child at play. Today we may perhaps hope that it will be possible to overcome the basic error—namely, the assumption that the imaginative content of a child's toys is what determines his playing; whereas in reality the opposite is true. 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. We are also familiar with a number of ancient playthings that were presumably once cult objects but that scorn the function of masks: balls, hoops, tops, kites—authentic playthings; "the more authentic, the less they meant to adults." Because 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. This is borne out by the different kinds of dollhouses that Gröber includes. Imitation (we may conclude) is at home in the playing, not in the plaything.

But of course, we would penetrate neither to the reality nor to the conceptual understanding of toys if we tried to explain them in terms of the child's mind. After all, a child is no Robinson Crusoe; children do not constitute a community cut off from everything else. They belong to the nation and the class they come from. This means that their toys cannot bear witness to any autonomous separate existence, but rather are a silent signifying dialogue between them and their nation. A signifying dialogue to the decoding of which this work provides a secure foundation.

Published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, May 1928. *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 113-117. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.



# Toys and Play

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## Marginal Notes on a Monumental Work

Karl Gröber, *Kinderspielzeug aus alter Zeit: Eine Geschichte des Spielzeugs* [Children's Toys from Olden Times: A History of Toys] (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1928), 68 pages, with 306 black-and-white illustrations and 12 color plates.

It will be a while before you are ready to read this book, so fascinating is the sight of the endless variety of toys that its illustrated section unfolds before the reader. Battalions of soldiers, coaches, theaters, sedan chairs, sets of dishes—all in Lilliputian format. The time had to come when someone would assemble the family tree of rocking horses and lead soldiers, and write the archaeology of toyshops and dolls' parlors. This has been done here in a scholarly and conscientious manner and without any archival pedantry in the book's text, which stands on a par with the illustrations. The book is cast in a single mold, and the reader can detect nothing of the labor involved in producing it. Now that the book lies before us, it is hard to imagine how it could ever have been otherwise.

But it must be said that research of this kind is in tune with the age. The German Museum in Munich, the Toy Museum in Moscow, the toy department of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris—all creations of the recent past or the present—point to the fact that everywhere, and no doubt for good reason, there is growing interest in honest-to-goodness toys. Gone are the days of character dolls, when adults pandered to childish needs under the pretext of satisfying childlike ones. The schematic individualism of the arts-and-crafts movement and the picture of the child given by the psychology of the individual—two trends that understood each other all too well—were undermined from within. At the same time, the first attempts were

made to escape from the influence of psychology and aestheticism. Folk art and the worldview of the child demanded to be seen as collectivist ways of thinking.

On the whole, the work under review corresponds to this latest state of research, if indeed it is possible to tie a standard work of a documentary kind to a theoretical stance. For in reality the stage reached here must form a transition to a more precise definition of our knowledge of the subject. The fact is that the perceptual world of the child is influenced at every point by traces of the older generation, and has to take issue with them. The same applies to the child's play activities. It is impossible to construct them as dwelling in a fantasy realm, a fairy-tale land of pure childhood or pure art. Even where they are not simply imitations of the tools of adults, toys are a site of conflict, less of the child with the adult than of the adult with the child. For who gives the child his toys if not adults? And even if he retains a certain power to accept or reject them, a not insignificant proportion of the oldest toys (balls, hoops, tops, kites) are in a certain sense imposed on him as cult implements that became toys only afterward, partly through the child's powers of imagination.

It is therefore a great mistake to believe that it is simply children's needs that determine what is to be a toy. It is nonsense to argue, as does an otherwise meritorious recent work, that the necessity of, say, a baby's rattle can be inferred from the fact that "As a rule it is the ear that is the first organ to clamor for occupation"—particularly since the rattle has always been an instrument with which to ward off evil spirits, and this is why it has to be put in the hand of a newborn baby. And even the author of the present work is surely in error when he writes, "The child wants from her doll only what she sees and knows in adults. This is why, until well into the nineteenth century, the doll was popular only when dressed in grown-up clothing; the baby in swaddling clothes that dominates the toy market nowadays was completely absent." No, this is not to be laid at the door of children; for the child at play, a doll is sometimes big and sometimes little, and as an inferior being it is more often the latter. We may say instead that until well into the nineteenth century the idea of an infant as a creature shaped by a spirit of its own was completely unknown; on the other hand, the adult was the ideal in whose image the educator aspired to mold the child. This rationalism, with its conviction that the child is just a little adult, makes us smile today, but it had the merit of declaring seriousness to be the child's proper sphere. In contrast to this, the inferior sense of "humor" manifests itself in toys, alongside the use of larger-scale objects, as an expression of the uncertainty that the bourgeois cannot free himself of in his dealings with children. The merriment that springs from a sense of guilt sits admirably with the silly distortions of size. Anyone who wishes to look

the hideous features of commodity capital in the face need only recollect toyshops as they typically were up to five years ago (and as they still often are in small towns today). The basic atmosphere was one of hellish exuberance. On the lids of the parlor games and the faces of the character dolls, you found grinning masks; they gaped at you alluringly from the black mouth of the cannon, and giggled in the ingenious "catastrophe coach" that fell to pieces, as expected, when the train crashed.

But scarcely had this militant viciousness made its exit than the class character of this toy reappeared elsewhere. "Simplicity" became the fashionable slogan of the industry. In reality, however, in the case of toys simplicity is to be found not in their shapes but in the transparent nature of the manufacturing process. Hence, it cannot be judged according to an abstract canon but differs in different places, and is less a matter of formal criteria, because a number of methods of processing—carving, in particular—can give free rein to their imagination without becoming in the least incomprehensible. In the same way, the genuine and self-evident simplicity of toys was a matter of technology, not formalist considerations. For a characteristic feature of all folk art—the way in which primitive technology combined with cruder materials imitates sophisticated technology combined with expensive materials—can be seen with particular clarity in the world of toys. Porcelain from the great czarist factories in Russian villages provided the model for dolls and genre scenes carved in wood. More recent research into folk art has long since abandoned the belief that "primitive" inevitably means "older." Frequently, so-called folk art is nothing more than the cultural goods of a ruling class that have trickled down and been given a new lease on life within the framework of a broad collective.

Not the least of this book's achievements is that Gröber decisively shows how the economic and particularly the technological culture of the collective have influenced toys. But if to this day toys have been far too commonly regarded as objects created for children, if not as the creations of children themselves, then with play it is the other way around: play has been thought about altogether too exclusively from the point of view of adults, and has been regarded too much as the imitation of adults. And it cannot be denied that we needed this encyclopedia of toys to revive discussion of the theory of play, which has not been treated in this context since Karl Groos published his important work *Spiele der Menschen* [People at Play] in 1899.<sup>1</sup> Any novel theory would have to take account of the "Gestalt theory of play gestures"—gestures of which Willy Haas recently listed (May 18, 1928) the three most important.<sup>2</sup> First, cat and mouse (any game of catch); second, the mother animal that defends her nest and her young (for example, a goalkeeper or tennis player); third, the struggle between two animals for prey, a bone, or an object of love (a football, polo ball, and so on). Going

beyond that, one would have to investigate the enigmatic doubles of stick and hoop, whip and top, marble and king-marble, as well as the magnetic attraction generated between the two parts. In all probability the situation is this: before we transcend ourselves in love and enter into the life and the often alien rhythm of another human being, we experiment early on with basic rhythms that proclaim themselves in their simplest forms in these sorts of games with inanimate objects. Or rather, these are the rhythms in which we first gain possession of ourselves.

Last, such a study would have to explore the great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play: the law of repetition. We know that for a child repetition is the soul of play, that nothing gives him greater pleasure than to "Do it again!" 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. And in fact, every profound experience longs to be insatiable, longs for return and repetition until the end of time, and for the reinstatement of an original condition from which it sprang. "All things would be resolved in a trice / If we could only do them twice." Children act on this proverb of Goethe's. Except that the child is not satisfied with twice, but wants the same thing again and again, a hundred or even a thousand times. This is not only the way to master frightening fundamental experiences—by deadening one's own response, by arbitrarily conjuring up experiences, or through parody; it also means enjoying one's victories and triumphs over and over again, with total intensity. An adult relieves his heart from its terrors and doubles happiness by turning it into a story. A child creates the entire event anew and starts again right from the beginning. Here, perhaps, is the deepest explanation for the two meanings of the German word *Spielen*: the element of repetition is what is actually common to them.<sup>3</sup> Not a "doing as if" but a "doing the same thing over and over again," the transformation of a shattering experience into habit—that is the essence of play.

For play and nothing else is the mother of every habit. Eating, sleeping, getting dressed, washing have to be instilled into the struggling little brat in a playful way, following the rhythm of nursery rhymes. Habit enters life as a game, and in habit, even in its most sclerotic forms, an element of play survives to the end. Habits are the forms of our first happiness and our first horror that have congealed and become deformed to the point of being unrecognizable. And without knowing it, even the most arid pedant plays in a childish rather than a childlike way; the more childish his play, the more pedantic he is. He just does not recollect his own playing; only to him would a book like this have nothing to say. But when a modern poet says that everyone has a picture for which he would be willing to give the whole world, how many people would not look for it in an old box of toys?

Published in *Die literarische Welt*, June 1928. *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 127–132. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

## Notes

1. Karl Groos (1861–1946), German philosopher, wrote a number of pioneering works on the psychology of human and animal play.
2. Willy Haas (1891–1973), German-Jewish author and critic, founded the periodical *Die literarische Welt*, which he edited until 1933.
3. The German word *Spielen* means both “to play” and “games.”